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Definition: **absinthe also absinth** from *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate(R) Dictionary*

 [pronunciation](#)

(1612) **1** : wormwood **2** : a green liqueur which is flavored with wormwood, anise, and other aromatic herbs and commercial production of which is banned in many countries for health concerns; *also* : a liqueur resembling absinthe

Summary Article: **Absinthe**

From *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Alcohol*

The beverage known as absinthe has a long and storied history that often obscures the reality of the drink's properties as well as its origins. The name *absinthe* is derived from the plant *Artemisia absinthium* (popularly referred to as wormwood), native to temperate portions of Eurasia and Africa. Several medicinal texts from the ancient Egyptian, Greek, and Roman worlds make mention of early forms of absinthe. According to Pliny, beverages distilled with the essence of the plant caused contractions in the stomach, helped expel bile, acted as a diuretic, and helped eliminate gas. In the Middle Ages, absinthe was additionally believed to remedy illnesses particular to women. Some also argue that absinthe was used as an abortifacient, although this point is difficult to establish—it certainly was one of the many drugs available to women that might induce a miscarriage, but it appears that it was used with the intended goal of reestablishing a regular menstrual flow rather than ending a pregnancy. It was not until the 19th century that absinthe became the widely popular staple of French café culture that we are most familiar with today.

There are several popular tales in France regarding the origins of modern absinthe production. Some argue that the monks of Saint Benoit, situated near the French–Swiss border, had been producing the beverage for quite some time before passing the recipe along to a Dr. Pierre Ordinaire, who had exiled himself from Paris to Couvet for political reasons following the revolution. In other accounts, Ordinaire, riding through Neuchatel, Switzerland, happened across a folk remedy that utilized absinthe, and he prescribed it to his own patients. The most popular version has it that Ordinaire learned the recipe specifically from women of the Henriod family, also Swiss. All three of these stories have the benefit of giving credit to the French for the spread of absinthe as we know it today.

While Ordinaire did indeed live and practice medicine in Switzerland, the dates of his life do not bear out any of these stories. Instead, it was the matriarch of the Henriod family, whose name has not been preserved, who created and initially distilled modern absinthe in Neuchatel. There is also good evidence that Madame Henriod marketed the drink *Extrait d'Absinthe* as having medicinal qualities. In 1798, Major Daniel-Henri Dubied bought the recipe, and with the help of Abram-Louis Pernod, Dubied opened a distillery. Business was so successful that Pernod opened his own distillery, which quickly proved too small. In 1804, in order to avoid taxes applied to foreign goods, Pernod moved his facility across the border into Pontarlier, France. In 1805, Pernod established *Pernod Fils*, the first and best-known French distillery of absinthe. Marrying Dubied's daughter in 1807, Pernod solidified his dominance in absinthe production, although other producers also rose up in the next 20 years.

It was not until 1830 that absinthe began to be more widely popular, oddly enough as a result of the

French invasion of Algeria, undertaken by the Bourbon Restoration monarch Charles X. Absinthe, which was still perceived to have medicinal qualities, was prescribed to soldiers in Algeria in order to prevent both dysentery and malaria. After the war, soldiers fondly recalled their consumption of absinthe in the hot, dry climate and its central role in breaking up the monotony of garrison life, and absinthe consumption continued at a high rate among French men in Madagascar in the subsequent invasion. Indigenous populations also came to drink absinthe regularly, much earlier than the French in the metropole, in fact. A number of French absinthe producers constructed factories close to the colonies as a result, and postcards from Algiers and other large colonial cities in the early colonial years show cafés papered with advertisements for the beverage.

As these soldiers came back to Paris, they encouraged café owners and goers alike to take notice of the drink. Demanding it in the well-known cafés of the *grands boulevards*, such as *Café du Helder*, while on medical leave, the soldiers simultaneously popularized the drink and continued to perpetuate the belief that absinthe contained medicinal properties. It also appears that many Parisians associated it with the exoticism that they believed defined life in Algeria. By 1870, absinthe was widely available in the chic cafés that lined newly widened Parisian streets, where a bourgeois public culture was asserting itself. In the final third of the 19th century, fashionable, middle-class French men and women regularly spent a portion of their evenings at cafés, slowly drinking while socializing with their peers. Respectable women regularly drank absinthe in these settings, often saying that their physicians had recommended it for their poor stomachs, although no such excuse was strictly necessary to justify the drink's consumption.

Absinthe lent itself particularly well to this habit, as its consumption was drawn out by the traditions surrounding it. When a Parisian ordered absinthe in an upscale café, the waiter brought not only the drink itself in an elaborate glass chalice but also an absinthe spoon (a flat, wide, dull knife with decorative designs cut into it), several sugar cubes, and a carafe of water. The drinker would, at his or her leisure, place the spoon across the top of the chalice, position the sugar in the center, and pour the water over the sugar until it dissolved completely. This operation would be repeated several times as the glass became depleted. To drink absinthe without first diluting it in this manner was completely unacceptable by middle-class café standards. By 1880, it appears that this ritualistic consumption was popularly referred to as *l'heure verte* (the green hour, in reference to the color of absinthe), lasting from 5:00 p.m. to 7:00 p.m.

Bohemian Culture

The drink's popularity, however, was not limited to the middle class. Absinthe was, in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, associated with French artists who self-identified as bohemians. Manet, Van Gogh, and Picasso are some of the most well-known enthusiasts of the beverage. By the end of the 20th century, absinthe was less expensive than wine, and some estimates put French consumption at 21 million liters.

These painters, writers, and actors often congregated in specific cafés, defining a social world for themselves that, by necessity, included the consumption of alcohol. Congregating in the Latin Quarter until 1860, these artists began to explore the cafés of the grand boulevards, where they discovered the congenial nature of absinthe consumption, and to set up their own establishments in working-class Montmartre. Circles formed around specific artists and their favorite cafés. These bohemian artists not only socialized in the cafés over absinthe, they also depicted them in their work. One of the most

famous images of absinthe comes from Edgar Degas's 1876 work, *Dans un café, ou L'Absinthe* (in a café, or Absinthe). The painting shows a young bohemian woman and man seated next to each other, each staring morosely off into the distance, totally disconnected from one another. A glass of absinthe sits before the woman. Degas, however, was far from the only artist to make absinthe a central character in his work—Jean Béraud's *Le buveur d'absinthe*, Vincent van Gogh's *L'Absinthe*, and Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec's *Monsieur Boileau au café*, all featured glasses of absinthe.

Beyond providing subject matter, however, many believed that absinthe's hallucinogenic properties also inspired artists. Albert Maignan's 1895 work *Green Muse*, which shows a floating woman in a green dress placing her hands on a poet's forehead, illustrates this popular belief. Temperance advocates pointed to the altered mental state associated with absinthe to argue in favor of a ban on distillation prior to World War I. Despite these claims, modern analyses of absinthe as it was commonly distilled in these years have given lie to the idea that wormwood inspired hallucinations. It appears that the psychoactive properties of the thujone in wormwood are negligible—instead, it was the high percentage of alcohol in the drink that caused an altered state of mind. The alcohol percentage of absinthe varied significantly between distillers, but anywhere from 45 to 75 percent alcohol by volume was common (for reference, traditional vodka today is distilled at 40 percent alcohol by volume). Nonetheless, popular culture portrayals of absinthe have continued to perpetuate the belief that absinthe induces hallucinations.

While absinthe consumption was highest in France during these years, the beverage also began to spread throughout Europe, most notably to the Czech Republic (then a part of the Austro-Hungarian empire), Great Britain, Spain, and the United States. Well-known authors, such as Oscar Wilde and Mark Twain, enjoyed the Sazerac, perhaps the first cocktail to incorporate absinthe, at The Absinthe Room in New Orleans and added to the impression that absinthe could aid the creative process. Additionally, many non-French who drank absinthe associated themselves with the norm-rejecting bohemian culture of Paris and thus expressed their identity through consumption of the beverage. Absinthe's association with the bourgeoisie was not nearly so strong outside of France, and the drink was best known for its ability to quickly and effectively intoxicate the drinker rather than for the congeniality that accompanied its consumption.



Absinthe preparation at the Armand Guy distillery in Pontarlier, France, in 2013. A large absinthe “fountain” with spigots allows for a slow stream of water to pass through the sugar on the absinthe spoon and into the full-strength absinthe in the glass

Ban and Revival

Despite the popularity of the beverage, some believed it was a dangerous substance that ought to be banned. Antialcoholism and temperance advocates seized on the claims of physicians such as Frenchman Valentin Magnan, who argued that absinthe was more harmful than other distilled alcohols. In cruel laboratory experiments, physicians injected rats and gerbils with wormwood, which induced seizures and death, in order to prove that absinthe was a neurotoxin. In the 30 years prior to the outbreak of World War I, some physicians embraced the name *absinthism* to describe a disease more dangerous and deadly than alcoholism.

Initially banned in colonies such as the Congo Free State, most European nations, excepting Spain and Portugal, outlawed the production of absinthe prior to World War I. It was only in 1915, just after the beginning of the war and the accompanying concerns over the health of the young male population (many speculated that absinthe would ravage the bodies of potential soldiers), that the French banned absinthe. Following this ban, a number of anise-flavored liqueurs, known as pastis, became popular. Pastis, however, was bottled with sugar (hence the designation liqueur), did not include wormwood, and was distilled at a generally lower percentage of alcohol by volume. The popularity of these drinks grew quickly, particularly in the South of France, and today, pastis remains one of the most widely consumed beverages in France.

In the years following the ban, an aura of mystery began to build around absinthe. Outside of Spain and Portugal, where distillation continued all along, absinthe did not begin to become available again until 1988, when the European Union passed a series of food and beverage regulations that effectively legalized the drink once again. Although there were initial attempts to prevent this, French producers sidestepped them through clever labeling, and in April 2011, the French Senate voted in favor of once

again legalizing absinthe. The Swiss and Italians similarly re-legalized absinthe in the early 21st century, and the United States allowed distillation in 2007, with strict prohibitions against any thujone in the beverage. Although modern scientific experiments have demonstrated that the amount of wormwood in absinthe is not sufficient to induce hallucinations, an aura of mystery and danger continues to surround absinthe.

See Also: Aperitifs; Art; Cabarets; Cafés; France; High-Potency Drinks; Pernod Ricard; Wines, French

Further Readings

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