



Return of the green fairy:

IT FEELS A LITTLE DANGEROUS JUST SAYING THE WORD, doesn't it? Absinthe. The way it hisses off the tongue like a curse. Like the slice of a dagger. Like a furtive dance with a mistress in the dark. It is the Eddie Haskell of spirits. A wry smile and clenching of the teeth. The enemy you love to hate and the drinkable proof that good and evil are far closer bed-fellows than we care to admit. If The Garden's serpent had a name, it could very well have been Absinthe.

For centuries, absinthe has remained in this clandestine place of myth and mystery. It was the preferred spirit of poets like Rimbaud and Verlaine, and novelists like Hemingway and Strindberg. Some claim it was absinthe that led to the madness that caused van Gogh to cut off his ear for the sake of unrequited love, or inspired Picasso to paint some of his most famous works. And now, after having suffered a ban in the United States since 1912, the Green Fairy is finally back on the market. Well, sort of.

One of the spirit's key ingredients, the herb wormwood, contains a chemical called thujone, which has been thought to cause certain psychedelic affects on the brain "different" from those inspired by more conventional alcohol consumption. Several scientific studies over the last 50 years, however, have been inconclusive in proving or disproving the notion that thujone has significant psychoactive properties. Moreover, since the U. S. lifted its ban on the spirit in 2007, the Food and Drug Administration has taken some of the risk (perhaps the fun?) out of the absinthe mystery, requiring all absinthe distilled in this country contain no more than 10 parts per million of thujone.

Despite its mystery and infamy, absinthe is a wonderful liquor, coating the tongue with a delightfully soothing oiliness and delivering an incredibly strong punch of licorice flavor (you must like the taste of licorice to even think about trying the beverage). Here you will find four outstanding absinthes worthy of your sampling (three distilled in the U.S. and one in the Czech Republic). So get out the paints and hide the knives. The Green Fairy is back.

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ABSINTHE ORIGINAL ↑

I found this bottle of genuine Czech absinthe superior in both flavor and "effect." The sweetness of the American brands is all but completely absent here, and the sharp grip of its sour claws chews on the back of your throat for minutes after the first sip.

If you're feeling adventurous, go online and order a bottle for your next party. People will be impressed. **\$95** at www.originalabsinthe.com

Best Enjoyed With: "The Letters of Vincent van Gogh"

ABSENTE, ABSINTHE REFINED

Proclaiming its obvious substitution of traditional wormwood with something called "southern wormwood" while also coming in at just 55 percent alcohol by volume, Absinthe Refined is a nice set of training wheels for virgins of the Green Fairy. Pick some up and start your journey down the green road. **\$35** at Traino's Wine and Spirits in Marlton

Best Enjoyed With: "The Old Man and the Sea," by Ernest Hemingway



LUCID ↑

What a beautiful bottle. What a haunting portent its searing eyes seem to harbing. Of the three American brands, I found Lucid the most pleasing. Yes, it may be slightly too sweet for some palates, but hidden behind the curtain of its saccharin gentility are more subtle herbal notes that owe their pleasures to absinthe distillers of old. **\$60** at Medford Wine & Spirits

Best Enjoyed With: "A Season in Hell," by Arthur Rimbaud



ST. GEORGE ABSINTHE VERTE ↑

This was the first bottle of absinthe to be legally sold in the United States since the 1912 ban and, after a few sips, it's easy to see why the first batch sold out in less than 24 hours. Distilled with brandy, anise, mint, wormwood, lemon balm, hyssop, basil, and several other herbs, St. George is closer to its European counterparts in nose and flavor than any other American manifestation I've tried. **\$75** (and so difficult to find that you'll just have to stay tuned for batches delivered locally)

Best Enjoyed With: "The Complete Works of Edgar Allen Poe"