

The Return of the Green Fairy

No, this isn't an article about a slightly camp environmentalist who's decided to come back home!

No, this isn't an article about a slightly camp environmentalist who's decided to come back home!

The "green fairy" of the title is a translation of la fée verte, the alternative French name for absinthe, the notorious aperitif and favorite tippie of all those famous painters and writers who lived in France at the turn of the century

Monet, Van Gogh, Gauguin, Toulouse-Lautrec, Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Verlaine, Oscar Wilde...they were all at it!

Originally produced in the mid-eighteenth century, and touted as a restorative and a cure for various digestive and gastro-intestinal disorder (of which the French, it has to be said, have more than their fair share), it was the intervention of Henri-Louis Pernod, who recognized the drink's business potential and started producing it on a commercial scale alongside his more famous aperitif, which really put absinthe on the alcoholic map.

There are certainly some similarities between absinthe and Pernod. They are both aniseed flavored, they both turn cloudy when diluted with water - and they are both extremely adept at rendering you totally legless when consumed in even modest quantities.

During the First World War people began to worry about the social and medical problems associated with absinthe. As well as containing relatively innocuous ingredients such as licorice, aniseed, hyssop, angelica, fennel and star anise, it also contained significant amounts of Artemisia absinthial, or wormwood, which was reputed to be psychoactive in small doses, and generally to rot your brains!

In 1915 the French government responded to public and medical pressure and banned production and sale of la fée verte outright (the spoilsports!)

It goes without saying that the outlawing of absinthe only served to increase its notoriety, and it continued to be quite widely available on the clandestine market for years to come. Most of these black market products were of a highly dubious provenance and were, at best, a pale replica of the original drink, or, at worst, positively life-threatening.

(It's rumored that in the late 1930s Ernest Hemingway wrote most of his masterpiece For Whom the Bell Tolls whilst under the influence of the green fairy!)

The ban was lifted some years ago, although it has to be said that absinthe is still not all that easy to find. The best method of locating genuine absinthe (and of reading more about it) is via the Internet. Log on to Google, do a search for "absinthe" (without the quotes) and you'll find nearly half a million results to occupy your time and curiosity.

There is quite a ritual associated with drinking la fée verte. The traditional method is to pour a measure of absinthe into a glass, place a specially designed perforated spoon over the top of the glass, put one or two sugar cubes into the spoon and slowly pour a quantity of water over the sugar and into the glass.

A more recent development is the use of absinthe in cooking. The UK-based French chef Jean-Christophe Novelli (often described as the sexiest chef in the UK - but I wouldn't really know about that!) has created a number of dishes featuring absinthe.

He uses it to flavor risotto, to infuse fish and vegetables - and even makes an absinthe ice cream, which he serves with a Carpaccio of fresh pineapple.

But whether you drink it, eat it or pour it all over yourself, always remember that absinthe has a very high level of alcohol. Use it in moderation - and never, never drink and drive.

