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## Crazy for absinthe

**The potent green-hued liqueur pours back into the U.S. after a long ban is lifted**

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After an absence of nearly 100 years, absinthe is back -- with a vengeance.

The lifting of the U.S. ban, which dates to 1912, has opened a floodgate. Four brands of the anise-flavored liqueur with the sinister reputation are already on the market and nearly two dozen await approval -- including one called Mansinthe, commissioned by shock rocker [Marilyn Manson](#).

Done in by the early 20th Century Prohibition tide and the belief that it caused hallucinations and madness, absinthe has been vindicated by modern science. It's showing up in Chicago-area retail shops and in bars, where it is served in creative cocktails and in the classic preparation, simply mixed with water and sugar.

Absinthe is usually a green-hued liqueur, hence the nickname Green Fairy. Recipes vary, but connoisseurs agree on what real absinthe should contain: "The holy trinity is wormwood, anise and fennel," said Markus Lion, the German creator of Mansinthe. "If one is missing, it's not absinthe."

Grande wormwood is the source of thujone, the chemical blamed for the spirit's nefarious effects, although now it is largely believed that the high alcohol content was the culprit. (U.S. regulations prohibit more than 10 parts per million of thujone.)

Absinthe has a distinctive but subtle anise flavor. It tastes slightly bitter from the wormwood, but no more so than a strong herbal tea.

"It's an Alpine meadow in springtime," said David Nathan-Maister, head of Oxygenee, the U.K.-based company specializing in absinthe.

Of the four absinthes approved for sale in the U.S., Kubler Absinthe Superieure (\$50) has the longest history, dating to 1863. It continues to be distilled in Switzerland from locally grown plants and herbs, including the trinity and other traditional ingredients: hyssop, lemon balm, petite wormwood, mint, coriander and star anise.

"We also use some secret herbs," said Peter Karl, export director for the firm. Despite all the

herbs, the Kubler absinthe is clear inside its green bottle. It is a clandestine absinthe, a style created months after the 1910 Swiss ban; the clear liquid was easier to hide than the green version.

Another brand, Lucid (\$60), was designed by New Orleans native T.A. Breaux, an environmental scientist who has spent the last decade analyzing pre-ban absinthes to try and re-create them. (He said he "evacuated during Katrina with my entire collection of vintage absinthe, all dozen bottles.")

"Lucid is intended to be a representation of a good 19th Century absinthe," Breaux said. It's made at the landmark Combiér distillery in France using "French grande wormwood, European green anise and sweet fennel, and other herbs."

St. George Spirits Absinthe Verte (\$75) is the only absinthe made in the U.S. and uniquely American. "It's the product of 11 years of trial and error and a lot of really positive trials after that," said Lance Winters, master distiller in Alameda, Calif. His first batch, 3,600 bottles, sold out in six hours. A second batch will be sent to New York by mid-March, but should be available by mail-order to Illinois.

Winters distills with grande wormwood and fennel, but instead of the traditional green anise, he uses star anise. He departs from tradition in the coloration step by infusing opal basil, tarragon, meadowsweet and stinging nettles in the spirit.

Le Tourment Vert (\$60), served at [Madonna](#)'s post-Oscar party, is the most controversial brand among connoisseurs. Though distilled in France with classic ingredients, it's an odd product, flavored with sage and rosemary and artificially colored turquoise green. The packaging is impressive, with an outer canister protecting an etched-glass bottle. It can be mail-ordered from New York.

The strong taste of absinthe nearly requires it never be drunk neat or, worse yet, in shots. "You might as well inject Novocain directly into your tongue," said Nathan-Maister.

Sugar is optional, adding sweetness and viscosity, according to Gwydion Stone, founder of The Wormwood Society Web site ([wormwoodsociety.org](http://wormwoodsociety.org)), and creator of Marteau, a [Portland](#) brand due to be released in April.

"Sugar is not for the absinthe, it's for the drinker," Stone said.

Neptune's wrath

Preparation time: 5 minutes

Yield: 1 serving

In this cocktail from The Violet Hour, 1520 N. Damen Ave., the green color of the absinthe and chartreuse and the blue of the flamed chartreuse is meant to mirror the colors of an angry sea. If you are concerned about consuming raw eggs, use a pasteurized egg.

1 egg white

1 1/2 ounces gin

3/4 ounce fresh lemon juice

1/2 ounce absinthe

2 tablespoons simple syrup, see note

1/4 ounce green Chartreuse

Shake the egg white, gin, lemon juice, absinthe and simple syrup in a metal cocktail shaker without ice (this aerates the egg white and incorporates it into the liquid). Add clear ice cubes; shake. Strain into a coupe glass. Flame the Chartreuse in a separate coupe; pour while flaming on top of the cocktail.

Note: To make simple syrup, heat 1 part water and 2 parts sugar in a saucepan until the sugar dissolves. Cool. Any extra can be kept covered in the refrigerator for several weeks.

Nutrition information per serving: 254 calories, 0% of calories from fat, 0 g fat, 0 g saturated fat, 0 mg cholesterol, 28 g carbohydrates, 4 g protein, 57 mg sodium, 0 g fiber

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