



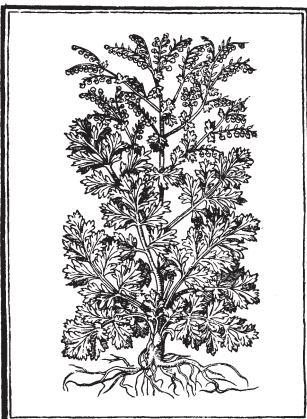
RETURN OF THE GREEN FAIRY

We took a glass of absinthe to compose our nerves.

– Thackeray

ABSINTHE IS BACK behind bars in the U.S., the fabled herbal liquor banned here since 1912. At that time the villain of the drink, according to the Department of Agriculture, was its content of wormwood, a bitter herb deemed to have a drastic effect on habitual users. The feds may also have had their knickers in a twist because of the raffish cultural backstory of the drink. Its abuse can provoke hallucinations, convulsions and psychoses.

During the Belle Epoch and the early twentieth century, absinthe was all the rage in Paris, other European sites and in major U.S. cities, especially New Orleans. In bistros absinthe seemed to be the choice intoxicant of painters, musicians, poets, journalists, philosophers, aristos, ne'er-do-wells, drunks, prostitutes, chronic troublemakers – anyone with the time and inclination to hang out and do some serious drinking. The list of famous devotees is extensive, including at random Gauguin, van Gogh, Manet, Toulouse-Lautrec, Degas, Verlaine, Baudelaire, Rimbaud, and Picasso. Roaring around France, Spain, Cuba and the U.S., Hemingway knocked back his own manly share.



Although it is not a psychedelic, absinthe is reported to induce clarity, a heightened state of mind and mood. Its abuse is believed to provoke mental deterioration.

The biblical “bitter gall and wormwood” has become proverbial. But the drink was consumed for thousands of years, sometimes as medication, sometimes for pure pleasure. Ancient absinthe, generally just wormwood leaves soaked in wine, has been the subject of diverse health claims. Hippocrates advised it for jaundice and anemia, Pythagoras claimed that it eased labor in childbirth, Pliny recommended it as a cure for bad breath. Onward to seventeenth-century France, a court lady wrote the definitive word to Mme. de Sévigné, “My little absinthe is the cure for all diseases.”

Then as now, absinthe has its own ritual. It is prepared by slowly pouring icy water through a lump of sugar on a slotted spoon over a glass holding a small amount of absinthe. The solution trickles into the glass until the liquor turns “louch,” generally a pale green, dubbed the “Green Fairy” – a spirit recently revisiting America.