

# Does absinthe make the heart grow fonder?

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Recently I have seen liquor stores with flashing signs that announce Absinthe! Absinthe! Absinthe! Inside the stores, bottles of Absinthe retail for \$50-\$70. With the ads and high price, maybe you've wondered "What is absinthe?"

Perhaps you might remember the French impressionist painters, such as Degas, who painted absinthe drinkers staring into space while they consumed a milky green liquid. Absinthe was originally marketed by many distilleries — Pernod's Absinthe was probably the most popular — as a beverage with a high alcohol content (45-74 percent) that was flavored with herbs, particularly fennel (*Foeniculum vulgare*) and wormwood (*Artemisia absinthium*), providing a bitter anise-like flavor.

The drinking of absinthe was a social event that might be compared with the Japanese tea ceremony; absinthe drinkers used special slotted spoons to hold a sugar cube, upon which ice-cold water (or an ice cube) was dripped into the absinthe. The drink became a favorite of the Bohemian culture in France and, as a result, was opposed by social conservatives and prohibitionists. Consequently "Absinthism" was labeled a social disease.

Probably the real coup de grace that resulted in banning absinthe was the case of Jean Lanfray of Switzerland, who murdered his entire family. Despite the fact that Lanfray was a major alcoholic, the entire blame was put on absinthe. Subsequently, absinthe was banned around the world.

One chemical culprit that was singled out for blame was the thujone of wormwood. Any alcoholic beverages imported into the U.S. had to be thujone-free. Recently, however, Dirk Lachemeier and others in Germany have found, upon examining period bottles of absinthe, that the real culprits were poisonous colorants, such as copper sulfate, and other ingredients, not the thujone.

This realization did not prevent scientists from publishing review after review showing that thujone was a major hallucinogen.

However, thujone is the principal constituent of commercial sage (*Salvia officinalis*, *S. fruticosa*, and their hybrids), and if thujone were hallucinogenic, then teenagers would be tripping out on sausage patties at fast food franchises and Thanksgiving dinners would descend into bacchanals after eating the dressing. Obviously, this has not happened, and thujone is really innocent in the levels that it is found in sage and wormwood.

"Absinthism," upon re-examination, was actually alcoholism. As a result of these findings and pressure from liquor companies, the ban on absinthe has been lifted in



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**Wormwood is a bitter herb and one of the principal ingredients in absinthe. Wormwood is a good topical anti-fungal (worm is Anglo-Saxon for fungus infection) and was once the chief ingredient in Absorbine Jr.**

many countries. However, wormwood oil, despite the blessing from the U.S. FDA as GRAS (Generally Recognized As Safe) at 1 ppm, is not entirely safe. Wormwood oil is variable but can contain toxic compounds such as sabinyl acetate (a known abortifacient and major constituent of savin juniper, which was previously used as an "emmenagogue"). Everything in moderation and pregnant women should be extremely cautious!

On the campus of Delaware State University, the Claude E. Phillips Herbarium, Delaware's center for research, education, and outreach about plant identification locations, and uses. Call 302-857-6452 (Dr. Susan Yost) to arrange a tour of the Herbarium, and call 302-857-6408 (Dr. Arthur O. Tucker) for more information about this article.