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THE  
Little Green Book  
OF  
*Absinthe*

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AN ESSENTIAL COMPANION  
WITH LORE, TRIVIA, AND CLASSIC AND  
CONTEMPORARY COCKTAILS

Paul Owens and Paul Nathan  
Drink Recipes by Dave Herlong

A PERIGEE BOOK





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*To the passionate and intrepid members of  
the absinthe community who have so selflessly  
shared their observations, preferences, and expertise.  
May your sense of taste never fail.*

## INTRODUCTION

Absinthe means trouble. The forbidden drink. The green fairy. The absinthe murders. Muse of poets, painters, and revolutionaries. So dangerous that the United States banned it in 1912, four years before cocaine and heroin.

So naturally now that absinthe again flows unchecked in bars across the United States and Europe, Las Vegas—the original town of swagger, rebellion, and naughty weekend adventures—has adopted the spirit as its own. Vegas means trouble, and legal absinthe hit the place like three cherries on a \$100 slot.

But in Vegas, where nothing stays unadulterated for long, absinthe wasn't likely to remain traditional, paired with sugar and ice water and served in an absinthe glass. In a flash of inspiration, Dave Herlong, master mixologist at the Palms Resort & Casino, began mixing it into cocktails. It was a new twist on an old idea. Absinthe began appearing in American cocktails a good forty years before the 1912 ban, most often dashed in to spice up mixed drinks. The Sazerac, America's most famous early cocktail, was a New Orleans creation made with rye whiskey, bitters, and an absinthe rinse. By 1900, adding absinthe to mixed drinks became so common that George Kappeler, a prominent barkeep of the era, wrote, "The free use of absinthe is injurious. Never serve it in any kind of drink unless called for by the customer."

It may have been uncalled for, but injurious? Plenty of experts at the time—doctors, politicians, preachers—bleated about the risks of something called "absinthism," akin to alcoholism but apparently more depraved. Chemists said the culprit was thujone, a neurotoxin found in grande wormwood (*Artemisia absinthium*, the ingredient that gives absinthe its name) that caused seizures, hallucinations, and brain damage. They were right about thujone: in high doses, it's lethal. But they were wrong about absinthe. It contains very little thujone. Any danger in absinthe comes from alcohol, not poisonous plants.

Prior to 1920 the only mixers were water, tonic, and perhaps a bit of lemon during the summer. Even ice was available only in limited quantities. Drink mixers came into vogue early in the twentieth century, and bartenders began focusing as much on the mixers as on the alcohol. Gin, for instance, has lost all hints of the juniper plant for which it was named, but as it has morphed into a neutral spirit, it has become easier to mix into a wider range of cocktails.

In Vegas, Dave Herlong's innovation has been to combine the fleet of mixers we have today with moderately spiced absinthe. His first creation was a variation on the vodka-based Lemon Drop, which large parties at the Palms began ordering two and three rounds of as a shot—an unheard-of order even around the high-stakes tables. Dave christened it the Gargoyle, the watcher and protector. He calls it his "mother sauce," the starting point for dozens of other recipes, all included here. You can add most anything to it: fresh muddled fruits, juices, liqueurs, and other liquors. There are many others unrelated to the Gargoyle, of course: frozen drinks and hot drinks, punches and spritzers, martinis and rickys, 117 in all. Each of the five sections contains some absolute favorites, the ones you have to try, serve, and then recommend

to others—indicated with an embellishment on the recipe’s title.

The idea of capturing this new breed of absinthe cocktail in a book took root at parties and bars in San Francisco, including Paul Owens’s restaurant, Tortilla Heights, as he and Paul Nathan watched what absinthe drinkers liked and what bartenders were experimenting with. The two of them—actually the two of us—met at one of Nathan’s absinthe parties not long before the California Department of Alcoholic Beverage Control and local police busted him for selling absinthe. To this day, Nathan and his bartenders remain the only people arrested for selling absinthe during America’s ninety-five-year ban.

We both discovered real absinthe in the 1990s in our separate travels through Europe, and our passion for absinthe comes in large part from those experiences. But fair warning: this is not a book for purists (thankfully since neither of us can claim to be pure). We candidly and gratefully acknowledge the true history of absinthe, which in more recent times has been co-opted for dubious purposes, but at the same time we refuse to restrict ourselves to what’s been done in the past. Our long-ago predecessors felt the same way, which is why we have innovations like absinthe spoons and fountains and the incredible variety of recipes from country to country that you see today. Let’s broaden our horizons. The days gone by ... have gone by. The world’s most illicit spirit has been turned loose, and it shows no signs of staying in Vegas.

## ABSINTHE ESSENTIALS



Absinthe ads like to trade on artists like Van Gogh and Toulouse-Lautrec, as if the history of the green fairy began in the Pigalle neighborhood of 1870s Paris, but wormwood-infused drinks have been around for thousands of years. Egyptian physicians were using them as antiseptics and cures for intestinal worms and stomachaches before King Tut. In ancient Greece, Olympic champions drank wine mixed with bitter wormwood as a reminder to remain humble in victory. And during the Middle Ages, Europeans infused beers and wines with wormwood to make health tonics.

### THE ORIGINAL GREEN GODDESS

The scientific name for wormwood, *Artemisia absinthium*, might have come from the Greek goddess of the forest, fertility, and the hunt, Artemis, who was said to have delivered it to the centaur Chiron, a great healer, to use as medicine. Aside from using wormwood to treat cramps and certain types of disease, many cultures historically believed it could protect the genitals and promote fertility.

Until the early 1600s, Europe's public houses didn't deal in spirits, only beer and wine. Liquor was primarily the domain of chemists and apothecaries. Absinthe shares those medicinal roots, despite being a relative latecomer to the bartender's shelf. As the legend goes, a French doctor, Pierre Ordinaire, invented it as a cure-all in Couvet, Switzerland, where he had fled the French Revolution in the 1780s. He was a tall, eccentric man who made his appointed rounds on an undersized horse named Roquette

and experimented with a tonic of wormwood, anise, hyssop, melissa, chamomile, and other herbs steeped in alcohol. The resulting tincture became popular in the region, farm country where locals hailed it as a cure-all. Dr. Ordinaire's housekeeper and lover was said to have sold his recipe for wider production after his death.

## HERBS AND DISTILLATION

For all the mystique surrounding absinthe as a cultural symbol, the drink itself starts innocently enough, as a neutral spirit usually made from grapes or grains. It gets mixed with a robust blend of macerated herbs, distilled and, depending on the recipe, steeped with additional herbs to add flavor and the telltale olive green color. A second, less desirable option is to mix herbal essences and artificial flavor and coloring into an alcohol base without distillation. This is the common Czech style of manufacturing. It's less expensive, but it loses some of the nuanced flavors that come from steeping intact plants. Distillers use a range of herbs that's almost culinary (see page 34 for an extensive list of traditional ingredients).

Like fine wines, there's a great diversity and subtlety to the best absinthes, and they require the same fresh ingredients, precise proportions, careful tending during distillation, and appropriate storage once in the bottle. Every brand is different, but a proper absinthe should have green anise, which contributes a licorice flavor and the *louche*; fennel, which has a more subdued and complementary licorice flavor; and grande wormwood, which contributes the bitterness and controversy. Some absinthes use petite wormwood (also called southern wormwood or southwood), which is a fine addition but not a substitute for grande wormwood.

If you think this version of events sounds too perfect, you're probably right. The Swiss had been distilling something close to absinthe since at least the 1750s, and Mere Henriod (the housekeeper of legend) and her sister had been making it before Dr. Ordinaire arrived in Couvet. It seems only too convenient that a French doctor rode in, if not on his high horse, then one with a grandiose name, and in the course of a few years created a medicine from local plants that Couvet's residents had until then merely been admiring from afar. The people of Couvet were farmers who were more likely to know the mountainside flora and its uses than a late-coming expatriate. Dr. Ordinaire may well have played a role in popularizing absinthe, but his tale of invention smells like French revisionist history. Unfortunately, we have little better to go on. In absinthe, we see what we want to see.

What we do know for sure is that one of the Henriod sisters' customers, Major Henri Dubied, was especially enthusiastic about the drink and bought the recipe in 1797. (In some versions of the story, Dr. Ordinaire lived on and sold the recipe himself.) After some experimentation, he opened a small commercial distillery the

next year in Couvet with his son-in-law, Henri-Louis Pernod. Like Dr. Ordinaire, Major Dubied was French and began tapping his contacts in the French military to spur sales. Disease was always a hazard in those days, and soldiers, their immune systems compromised by physical rigor, cramped living quarters, and exotic germs, were among the most vulnerable.

Absinthe sales took off from the start, and in 1805 Pernod invested his share of the profits in a new distillery just over the French border in Pontarlier, only sixteen miles from Couvet. France had the bigger sales potential, and by setting up his distillery in Pontarlier, Pernod could avoid the import taxes levied on Swiss-made absinthe.

Distillation turned out to be crucial to absinthe’s commercial success. An absinthe made with water or mixed with beer would have had a limited shelf life. In a tincture, alcohol preserved the concentrated botanical oils—the same oils that fall out of suspension to create the cloudy *louche* that appears when you add water. Stored in cool, dark, sealed bottles, absinthe can maintain potency for decades. Entrepreneurs, in fact, are still finding and selling rare caches of vintage absinthe that can fetch thousands of dollars per bottle.

When the French invaded Algeria in 1830, Pernod Fils (Pernod and Sons) absinthe went with them. To combat malaria, soldiers stationed in Algiers received daily rations of absinthe for their drinking water, a field cocktail they enhanced with sugar when they could get it. It was an acquired taste, but once acquired, it stuck, and French forces occupied Algeria for decades. Upon returning home, soldiers began asking for absinthe in cafés, and since the French had rarely won wars, civilians took a certain heady pride in ordering the same drink as their successful military men. “I’ll have what he’s having” was the sentiment of the times.

## ABSINTHE ORDINAIRE

This recipe for Absinthe Ordinaire represents a typical distillation formula from the late nineteenth century. “Ordinaire” in this case refers to the approximate level of alcohol in the finished product, not to Pierre Ordinaire, the fabled creator of absinthe.

Grande wormwood, dried and cleaned	2.5 kilograms
Hyssop flower, dried	500 grams
Citronated melissa, dried	500 grams
Green anise, crushed	2 kilograms
Alcohol (85 degrees)	16 liters

Infuse the entire cucurbit for twenty-four hours, add 15 liters of water, and distill carefully to produce 15 liters of product, adding:

Alcohol (85 degrees)	40 liters
Ordinary water	45 liters

Produces 100 liters at 45 degrees; mix and let rest.

-Translated from *Traité de la Fabrication des Liqueurs*, 1882

Already absinthe was displaying a remarkable ability to be everything to everyone. Created in the country, it had taken hold with the military and then urbanites, the respectable middle class who saw it as a tasty, healthful, patriotic drink. As its popularity grew, distillers less reputable than Pernod found ways to produce knockoff absinthes that skirted the intensive, expensive production processes authentic absinthe required. The low-grade absinthes used cheap flavorings and cheaper alcohol. The poorer classes flocking to Paris for factory work adopted these low-grade absinthes, which sometimes contained questionable and even poisonous additives.

Authentic absinthe's crisp herbal flavor gave it an immediate advantage over other spirits of the day. Cocktails as we know them didn't really come into their own until after World War I. Early versions would look Spartan to our eyes: minimal garnish, bitters, perhaps water and a little sugar to cut the spirits. Imagine drinking straight gin at room temperature in the middle of summer. Not very refreshing. But absinthe mixed with water, even without ice or sugar, even lukewarm, hit the spot. Absinthe had crossed the line from tonic to tippable.

Absinthe notched another gain in the 1860s, when an insect plague decimated France's grape crops and put the price of wine beyond reach of all but the well heeled. Drinking wine became a conspicuous statement of means, even as winemakers raged against absinthe's rise.

The era was as dynamic as the absinthe. Few periods in history have matched the late 1800s and early 1900s—the Belle Époque period in France—for advancements in science and engineering. The wealth of technologies nurtured an unprecedented culture of art, fashion, theater, and high living that we're still aspiring to today. Photography, haute couture, international exhibitions, and Impressionism all came out of the age. The talented and the talentless crowded into Paris's cafés and salons to discuss art theories, flaunt their intellects, and, of course, drink. Absinthe was hardly the exclusive domain of artists, but the combination of unusual color, the hypnotic spirals of milky yellow *louche* following a water drip, and its clear-headed buzz endeared it to Parisian creatives as an object of almost mystical worship.

Notably, the absinthe of a hundred years earlier had displayed the same properties but hadn't been shrouded in mystery in the same way. Part of the Belle Époque attraction was the ritual itself (see "Good *Louche*: The Absinthe Ritual"). The more popular absinthe got, the more formalized the ritual became. (Swiss farmers surely weren't using absinthe spoons and carafes of ice water back in Couvet, nor were the French soldiers, the Zouaves, in Algeria.) A careful preparation required adding the water drop by drop and attentively appreciating the pattern of the *louche* and the release of the oils' aromatics. Writers often speak of "entering the page," a short, personal ritual performed to find the right frame of mind for writing, and the meditative mixing of absinthe could have served the same purpose for the artists of the day.

## GOOD *LOUCHE*: THE ABSINTHE RITUAL

Traditionally, absinthe was served by pouring an ounce in a glass, then topping off with three to five parts cold water. Some of the low-stemmed absinthe glasses have a bulb shape at the bottom specifically to cue the pourer on the proper dose: when the bulb is full, you're ready to add water.

If you take it with sugar, which you'll probably want to if you're drinking a *verte* (French-style) absinthe, you'll need a slotted, trowel-shaped absinthe spoon to place across the rim of the glass to make it the traditional way. Set a sugar cube on the spoon, and slowly drip ice-cold water over the sugar and into the glass. Absinthe fountains provide a slow, steady drip of water. A *brouilleur*, a glass or metal cup that fits atop the glass to drip the water automatically, offers an elegant option to the traditional ritual.

Pouring slowly, if you're using cubed sugar, gives the water a chance to dissolve it, and gives you a chance to observe the *louche*. An experienced *absintheur* can identify a brand from across the room just by watching how it *louches*—how the herbs' oils cloud the drink as you add water. Absinthe's exceptionally high alcohol content (50 to 80 percent) isn't gratuitous. It keeps those oils in suspension. The higher the alcohol content, the more oils the absinthe can hold, and the more flavor you release by diluting it. Some of the most complex absinthes tend to have more alcohol, though a high alcohol content alone is not a reliable indicator of fine absinthe.

The other secret of the *louche* is that different plant oils fall out of suspension at different concentrations so that, as you add water, every absinthe reveals secrets about the herbs it holds and offers hints on how to pour. Anise is responsible for the *louche*. An absinthe heavy on anise and light on other botanicals will appear to *louche* suddenly and more uniformly. A more broadly herbed absinthe will *louche* in twisting, cascading trails that trace the path of your dripping water. (See clips of different styles of absinthe *louching* at [www.absintheparty.com](http://www.absintheparty.com).) In most mixed drinks you won't notice a *louche* amidst all the opaque mixers, but normally transparent cocktails paired with heavy-louching absinthes might appear milky.

If you're the daring type, you may want to pour your absinthe Bohemian style. Bohemian-style, or Czech-style, absinthes draw a lot of criticism for not being authentic and not containing enough anise, but that's not fair. They should instead be criticized because they generally taste horrible. (See "Good Taste: Mixing Absinthe Cocktails" on page 13 for more on Bohemian absinthe.) Nevertheless, the Bohemian ritual, while not historically authentic, has established a place in absinthe lore, and if you wish to punish yourself, we won't judge you.

To drink Bohemian style, pour a bit of chilled water into the glass, place

an absinthe spoon across the rim of the glass, and put a sugar cube on the spoon. Pour a measure of absinthe over the sugar cube and light the cube on fire. Admire the dancing flame. Let the sugar burn until it begins to turn brown, and then slowly pour the rest of your water over the cube. Take special care when lighting because alcohol has a blue flame that's not always easy to see but will burn you and your loose shirtsleeves just the same. So will smoldering sugar and hot glass. Whether you pour Bohemian absinthe or another style, use something that's at least 120 proof, or you'll have trouble lighting it.

There was also a darker side to the preoccupation with absinthe. With such widespread admiration of arts and culture, artists competed intensely outwardly or more subtly, to produce the most original, provocative, and fashionable ideas and looked for every edge they could get. Absinthe was like artistic steroids. Nearly everyone in France was drinking it at the time, but for creatives it was more than an aperitif. It was a symbol and a tool, the key to an elevated consciousness and an effortless bloom of ideas—the green muse.

The artists well knew it was an empty gambit, even as they hoped against hope. A common joke was of the hapless artist who needed seven absinthes to find his genius, but only ever had money enough to buy six. Or the muse might cut the other way, as Edmond Bourgeois wrote in a poem about drinking for inspiration: “It needed only one glass, and I drank two.”

Whether absinthe helped or hurt, it's undeniably true that some of the greatest artists of the age drank it, and drank it heavily, as they produced their iconic works. Edouard Manet's *Absinthe Drinker* ushered in the Impressionist era. Van Gogh's *Still Life with Absinthe* displays the characteristic yellow tones that showed up in so many of his paintings, said to be influenced by the color of absinthe. Some of France's greatest poets were notorious absinthe drinkers: Alfred de Musset, Charles Baudelaire, Paul Verlaine, Arthur Rimbaud. For them, absinthe might not have been indisputably good, but life without it would have been unthinkable.

Soon after, absinthe would enter a gray zone. Still popular, in the 1890s it began to face increasing disapproval from the upper classes, led by the wine industry and the temperance movement. Edgar Degas's masterpiece *L'Absinthe* was booed off the auction block unsold at Christie's in London. Absinthe was blamed for the essential breakdown of society. Belgium banned it in 1906, Switzerland in 1910, the United States in 1912, France in 1915.

*If absinthe isn't banned, our country will rapidly become an immense padded cell where half the Frenchmen will be occupied putting straight jackets on the other half.*

-GEORGES OHNET, 1907

At the time, science suggested that absinthe represented a real danger to imbibers, one that naïve or negligent citizens needed protection from. The explanations had the sheen of truth, but the underlying reasons were mythical. The governments,

winemakers, and religious teetotalers invented a history and persona for absinthe no less vivid and effective than the myths of the artists and writers.

Still, the mystique would mean little if absinthe didn't also captivate in the glass. And for it to do that, you'll need to know your way around the bar.

## Good Taste: Mixing Absinthe Cocktails

If you're the kind of person who enjoys gourmet wines, chocolates, or coffees, you'll probably get excited by absinthe's wide range of flavors. The spectrum is broad, and flavors overlap and diverge to an astounding degree. Even the same brand can differ vastly from year to year and bottle to bottle, especially artisanal brands.

There are three basic styles: Swiss, French, and Bohemian or Czech. The Swiss, French, and Bohemian monikers are not bound by geography. An American absinthe can be Swiss, a Spanish absinthe can be French, and a German absinthe can be Bohemian, if you follow us. To clear that up, in the chart below we refer to Swiss absinthes as *blanches* and French absinthes as *vertes*. The Bohemians are on their own. Note that as of this writing, there are no Bohemian-style absinthes being sold legally in the United States, but we've included two in the chart for comparison, and in the recipes, since they can be bought online.

A fourth category of absinthe has emerged in recent years, a category of one. Le Tourment Vert is billed as authentically French but in fact is an American absinthe in taste and market appeal. Those who enjoy drinking a glass of absinthe the traditional way would probably find little reason to pick up a bottle, but it distinguishes itself as a mixer. At 100 proof and with some sugars in the bottle, it straddles the line between liquor and liqueur; there's little anise, which makes it more agreeable to the American palate, and more mint and citrus. We think of it as the first cocktail absinthe, and as such we return to it frequently in recipes because of its supple character and ability to play nicely with many different flavors. Other, stronger absinthes get the call when we want absinthe's flavor center stage.

With so many different styles, and even tastes within each style, you might ask yourself, *Will a cocktail made with Lucid taste like the same cocktail made with Obsello?* No. Not even close. Because of that, each recipe calls for a specific brand and type. You can use absinthes other than what's listed, but know that you're striking out into the realm of experimentation. We encourage that and include this tasting chart to guide you in your choices. You will notice that we rarely call for a premium absinthe, a sipping absinthe, in a recipe for the same reason that you wouldn't mix your twelve-year Scotch with Coke.

The Swiss brands tend to be lighter and mix well with more subtle flavors and other liquors. They make great martinis and spritzers, are easily drinkable without sugar, and add nuance to a drink that you might otherwise mix using gin or vodka. French brands are almost always more bitter but also tend to be more complex and interesting. They mix well with fruit drinks, especially sweet fruits, as the bitterness and sugar complement one another. French brands are also great with punch for the same reason.

We tend to use French styles in place of whiskeys for mixing. They also work well in place of rum, but you may need to add some sugar or simple syrup to the mix. Bohemian absinthes tend to be even more bitter and less complex than French, and contain little or no anise. Some say they aren't absinthes at all, having come out of the Czech Republic in the early nineties with no ties to the pre-ban communities of distillers. When there's a call to substitute an outside brand for the one listed in the recipe, favor absinthes in the same category: Swiss absinthes can substitute for other Swiss, French for French, and Bohemian for Bohemian, with some tweaking of proportions to taste. When swapping out Tourment, it's best to lean toward a Swiss style.

Now excuse us while we step over to mix up some cocktails ...

BRANDS	ORIGIN	STYLE	BACKGROUND
<b>Clandestine</b>	Switzerland	<i>Blanche</i>	A former bootleg absinthe from the legendary Val-de-Travers region, birthplace of absinthe, distilled by Artemisia-Bugnon. One of the first to be licensed for sale after the Swiss ban was lifted.
<b>La Fée Absinth Bohemian</b>	UK, but distilled and bottled in the Czech Republic	Bohemian	If a Bohemian-style comes to the United States, this will probably be the first, and one of the best of that style.
<b>La Fée Absinthe Parisienne</b>	UK, but distilled and bottled in Paris	Verte	First French-style absinthe to be manufactured since the French ban in 1915 and first absinthe to be really marketed outside of the Czech Republic.
<b>Hill's</b>	Czech Republic	Bohemian	Bitter and aquamarine, Hill's is only nominally absinthe but did hit on a latent fascination with absinthe's traditions and lore that paved the way for a revival. Not yet sold in the United States.
<b>Kübler</b>	Switzerland	<i>Blanche</i>	Yves Kübler, grandson of the distillery's founder, led the return of legal absinthe to Switzerland in 2005, and later to the United States. All its herbs are grown in the Val-de-Travers region.
<b>Lucid</b>	France	Verte	First modern absinthe to be sold in America since the ban in 1912. Forensically re-created by Ted Breaux, maker of the vaunted Jade line of absinthes.
<b>Obsello</b>	Spain	Verte	A French-style absinthe created by two American expats living near Barcelona.
<b>Pernod</b>	France	Verte	The most popular historical absinthe recovers from its pastis phase to produce an enjoyable post-ban drink.
<b>St. George</b>	United States	Verte	First absinthe manufactured in America since the ban in 1912.
<b>Le Tourment Vert</b>	United States, but distilled and bottled in Cognac, France	American	Made with the US market in mind. Billed as "authentically French" but in fact is the first cocktail absinthe.