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GREEN GOLD

The return of absinthe.

BY JACK TURNER

By Ted Breaux’s estimate, there are only a few dozen people alive who have had the opportunity to taste authentic absinthe, the drink whose notoriety defined the Belle Époque and which has been banned in many countries for almost a century. It is a number that he is determined to increase. On a crisp, clear fall morning, he greeted me at the Combiér distillery, in Saumur, in France’s Loire Valley. It is here that Breaux, a thirty-nine-year-old environmental chemist from Louisiana, is trying to reverse-engineer absinthe, precisely as it was made a hundred years ago.

In the near-distance, the towers of Saumur’s castle rose above the slate roofs of the town like an image from a medieval Book of Hours. On the street outside, a pair of young men in military fatigues and black berets cycled past before disappearing into the dressage yards of the adjacent Cadre Noir, the élite equestrian academy that has taught the French cavalry since the eighteenth century. Across the way stood the commandant’s house, an elegant Second Empire building cordoned off from the street with pink and red roses.

Like the castle and the Cadre Noir, the distillery, whose interior was designed by Gustave Eiffel, is a survivor from an earlier age. Breaux refers to it as “the Temple,” and, as he took me past pallets of empty bottles and a row of potted lemon trees, there was certainly a resemblance to sacred architecture: one of the region’s Romanesque chapels, perhaps, with their pale limestone walls and vaulted ceilings. The narrow doorway was surmounted by a rose window, and graceful arched windows ran along one wall beneath a steep slate roof. Instead of incense, the air was heavy with the aromas of anise, fennel, and lucerne and the sharp tang of alcohol. Breaux was preparing to distill a batch of his Verte Suisse 65, one

of three absinthes that he makes based on vintage recipes.

The distillery was built in 1834, and though various features have been added, all its significant equipment predates the twentieth century. “It’s an anachronism,” Breaux said. Inside, it looks like something from a Jules Verne novel. A spaghetti tangle of pipes and tubes emerges from two rows of bulbous copper alembics that line the walls on either side. The stills were acquired in 1920, after the breakup of the Pernod Fils absinthe distillery in Pontarlier, in the French Jura, once the center of the absinthe industry. The Combiér distillery is, literally, a museum; Breaux, who distills there every few months, has access to it in return for a small commission on every bottle he produces. During distillation, an occasional group of tourists wanders through, admiring the alembics. When I visited, sacks of herbs were stacked in every available space; there was a container of grape alcohol the size of a small car, and an electric pump. Near the entrance stood an immense plastic tub of wormwood, absinthe’s distinctive and contentious constituent, which, since the late nineteenth century, was held to cause insanity. Down the center of the room, suspended fifteen feet above the floor, ran a wrought-iron *passerelle*, or walkway, whose lacy gold-and-maroon ironwork clearly bore the signature of Gustave Eiffel. Since Combiér began operating, techniques of distillation have moved on to embrace new technologies such as mechanized mixing and electronic temperature and pressure controls. But obsolescence is precisely what Breaux wants.

Breaux seems an unlikely man to revive a drink with such a fearsome reputation. Amiable, muscled, and bespectacled, he is a picture of wholesomeness. His hobbies include sports-car restoration and the reworking of

vintage-guitar circuitry. He has been nominated to be president of a society dedicated to the restoration of Marshall Bluesbreaker amplifiers. Among his published work is an article on Rick-enbacker guitars called "Putting the Jangle Back in the Jingle." Breaux was dressed in jeans, a T-shirt, and a weathered leather jacket, one of the few items he had managed to salvage from his house, in New Orleans, destroyed by Hurricane Katrina. He had left the city the morning before Katrina hit, taking with him a guitar, some vintage firearms, and a collection of hundred-year-old absinthes.

Breaux was born in New Orleans, which is also where the earliest American cocktails, like the Sazerac and the Hurricane, originated, and the only place in the United States where absinthe was ever really popular. In the French Quarter, people can still visit the Old Absinthe House, once celebrated for its absinthe frappés but now serving absinthe substitutes such as Pernod and Herb-saint, an anise liqueur native to the city. Breaux's interest began in 1993, when a colleague mentioned a noxious green drink that made people insane. Breaux turned for more information to the Merck Index, which had an entry describing absinthe as a liqueur that in-

duced nervousness, stupor, convulsions, and death. He became hooked on the sheer implausibility of it all. "How could you ignore that?" he said. How could a deadly drink be so popular, and how could such a popular drink disappear so entirely? It was evident that, after a century of accumulating ignorance, the only real solution to the mystery was a matter of chemical forensics: to analyze and make the drink for himself.

Breaux is at heart a restorer. In his professional life, he is a chemist work-

ing for a private firm that specializes in the analysis and repair of environmental damage. In most cases, he spends his time inspecting damage caused by the petrochemical industry. "I take samples, I analyze, I look to see what the constituents of concern are," he said. "I look for the source of those constituents." Then he heads back to the lab and tries to figure out a way of restor-



Nothing else has the same wow factor. Photograph by Hans Gissingner.

ing the status quo ante. This is essentially what he is trying to do with absinthe. "There is nothing on the market that resembles the most popular liquor of the nineteenth century," he told me, "and I'm going to make it, just short of driving myself and any others crazy."

Breaux clambered up a stepladder and sealed an alembic shut by means of a stout, studded hatch, such as you might find on a diving bell. Inside was an olive-green mush of herbs

that he had left to macerate the previous day. After soaking in grape alcohol for between twenty-four and forty-eight hours, the herbs release their flavors into the macerate, and distillation can begin. Breaux switched on the boiler, and steam began to heat the copper sleeve of the alembic.

According to Breaux, the process, much like any distillation, is essentially one of selection. His goal is to separate the good flavors from the bad—to "bring the perfumes forward" while leaving the heavy, acrid compounds behind. Wormwood is proverbially bitter—the vindictive God of Jeremiah says, "I will feed them with wormwood, and make them drink the water of gall"—and distillation of the macerate is the alchemical step that allows a sweet, floral fragrance to emerge.

As the temperature of the alembic rises, the alcohol and the aromas evaporate into a rounded receptacle above, known as a Moor's head. Then the mixture runs upward through a slender copper tube, the "swan's neck," where it gradually condenses. At Combiér, the swans' necks arc and converge beneath Eiffel's airy *passerelle* in a cluster of bulbs and cylinders, where the distillate collects. There are no instruments to guide the process except several thermome-

ters and a hydrometer, which measures the density—and hence the alcohol content—of the liquid emerging from the alembic. Breaux says that learning to use this cluster of tubes and piping has taken practice—"It's like learning to drive a new car"—but he feels that an authentic approach is crucial. Distilling a herbal liqueur is a more delicate matter than, say, obtaining grain spirits such as vodka or rye whiskey. The stills were made for absinthe in its heyday; every vessel, bulb, and bend

has a purpose evolved from a century of experience.

As the alembic heated, Breaux began preparing the next day's batch. He handed me a small carpenter's saw and set me to work cutting up bundles of wormwood. As I sawed, the twigs crackled and snapped like dried lavender, giving off a fine dust that left a penetrating, bitter taste on my tongue. Meanwhile, Breaux loaded his other herbs, which he weighed in a plastic tub, into an empty alembic. He stomped on a sack of seeds, to crush them, and then heaved a burlap sack of a green, lucerne-like herb onto the scales. Breaux is evasive about exactly what herbs he uses. The current blend, the result of years of experiment, effectively determines the character of the final drink. He makes his absinthes from entirely natural ingredients, and there has been much speculation about what those ingredients are. In the small, partisan world of absintheurs—a loose fraternity that posts obsessively on Internet forums—some critics wonder if Breaux, being a chemist, might have secretly resorted to artificial means. Breaux impatiently dismisses such charges. "You can get enough sweetness if you know what you're doing," he says.

As he spoke, the first of the distil-

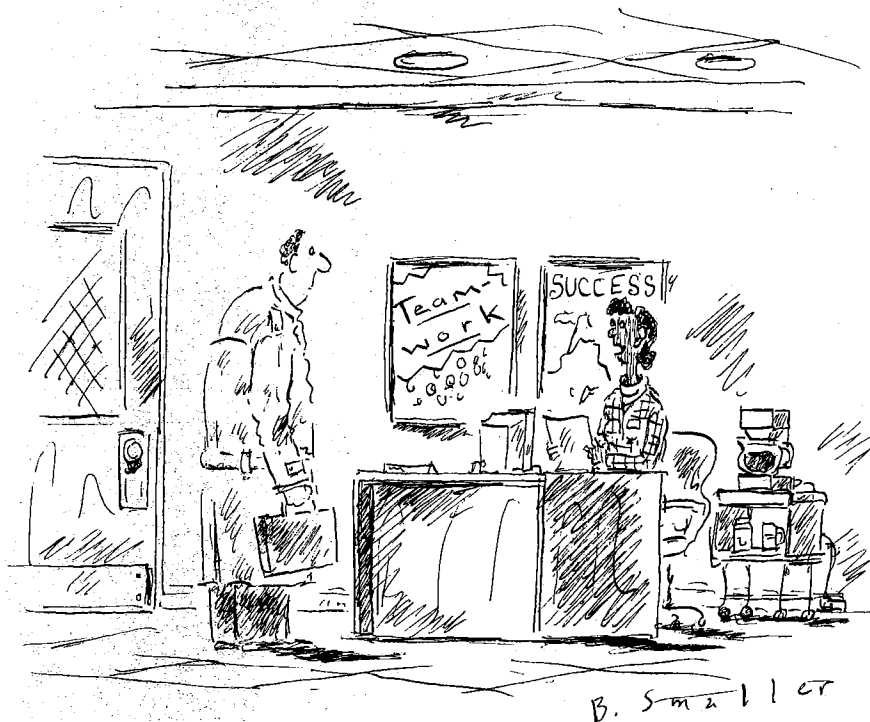
late, a clear, colorless liquid, emerged from the swan's neck. While we went on sawing, weighing, and sorting herbs, Breaux kept a close eye on the distillate as it flowed from the hydrometer chamber. Obtaining a satisfactory result requires developing a feel for the whole wheezing and hissing ensemble. Through the course of a distillation, Breaux must adroitly juggle the "head"—the first distillate to emerge—then the more full-bodied "heart," and, finally, the pungent tails, or "phlegm," while keeping a careful eye on the hydrometer. If he switches off the heat too early, the most aromatic compounds remain in the alembic; too late and the distillate is ruined by bitterness coming over from the macerate.

By the afternoon, the distillate was coming through in a steady stream. Breaux checked the hydrometer regularly but, just as often, relied on the evidence of his tongue and finger, encouraging me to do the same. The flavor gradually deepened from the hot, clean, light taste of the first of the heads, all fire and floral notes, to something darker and more robust. Even after years of distilling, Breaux expresses wonder at the metamorphosis that occurs within a few dozen feet

of copper piping. The liquid, he says, is "like poison going in but perfume coming out."

The invention of absinthe is traditionally credited to Dr. Pierre Ordinaire, a French Huguenot who fled France for the Val-de-Travers, a narrow, mountain-crowded strip of farmland in the Swiss Jura. Ordinaire made a living by riding up and down the valley on his horse, Roquette, hawking a tonic distilled from wormwood, fennel, and green anise. These are still the three essential ingredients of absinthe; other ingredients include hysop, melissa, star anise, and coriander. (There is no single absinthe recipe, any more than there is a single way of making gin.) It is now known that similar drinks were made earlier, but it was Ordinaire who first distilled wormwood with fennel and anise, and who first marketed the drink.

In the following decades, several commercial producers sprang up in the valley and beyond, the most famous being Pernod Fils, which operated just across the French border, in Pontarlier. Its 136-proof absinthe was popular with the French Army in Algeria, who enjoyed it as an apéritif and used it to disinfect contaminated drinking water. When the soldiers returned from Africa, they brought a taste for absinthe back with them. Absinthe's popularity peaked in the final decades of the century, helped by the phylloxera outbreaks that decimated French vineyards in the eighteen-sixties and seventies. As the cost of wine and cognac soared, people switched to absinthe. During the craze that followed, absinthe came to be seen not merely as a drink but as a way of life, the elixir of bohemia. Drinking it became an elaborate ritual: a perforated spoon, often highly ornate, supported a sugar cube over a distinctive glass containing a "dose" of absinthe. Water was poured over the sugar into the absinthe, causing it to "louche," or turn a cloudy pale green. Absinthe and those who drank it became a favorite subject for painters from Degas to Picasso. Paul Verlaine developed the notion of absinthe as the drink of the artistic temperament, proclaiming, "For me, my only glory is a simple, ephemeral absinthe."



B. Smallick

"You get five paid sick days and two disgruntled days."

(Whether or not absinthe aided his intoxicated versifying, it probably helped dull the pain he suffered from syphilis, gonorrhea, rheumatism, and bronchitis.) Verlaine's fellow-poet and sometime lover Arthur Rimbaud was also a student at what he called the "Academy of Absomphe," fuelling his poetics of sensory disorder with the "sagebush of the glaciers." Toulouse-Lautrec went so far as to teach his pet cormorant to drink it. He carried his own dose in a hollowed-out cane and took it "diluted" with cognac, a combination he dubbed "the Earthquake."

In the increasingly conservative climate that prevailed in France at the end of the century, such antics did little to help absinthe's image. Alcoholism was not yet properly understood, and there was much confusion about absinthe's physiological effects. While bohemians asserted the drink's inspirational powers, a counter-myth spread that it somehow caused more harm than mere alcohol: a condition known as "absinthism." At a time when the temperance movement generally regarded wine as innocent, or even healthy, absinthe was singled out as especially noxious. People on both sides of the debate focussed on the role of the highly toxic oil of wormwood; this was thought, by enthusiasts, to be responsible for the drink's supposedly psychoactive properties, and, by critics, for its brain-rotting effect. Doctors blamed it for a range of social evils, including lunacy and degeneracy of the race. Flaubert, in the Dictionary of Received Opinion appended to his last novel, "Bouvard and Pécuchet," spoofed the prevailing tide of popular sentiment: "Absinthe: an extra-violent poison: one glass and you're dead. Journalists drink it while writing their articles. Has killed more soldiers than the Bedouins."

Then, in August, 1905, a Swiss farmer by the name of Jean Lanfray returned home from the fields and shot his wife and their two young daughters, before turning the gun, unsuccessfully, on himself. At the inquiry, much was made of the fact that Lanfray had consumed two glasses of absinthe on the morning of the murders. It counted for little that he had also drunk a cognac, a brandy-laced coffee, a crème de

menthe, seven glasses of wine, and another litre of wine on returning home. A combination of hysteria and quasi-scientific claims turned popular opinion against absinthe. In 1907, four hundred thousand French citizens signed a petition, to the effect that "absinthe makes one crazy and criminal, provokes epilepsy and tuberculosis, and has killed thousands of French people. It makes a ferocious beast of man, a martyr of woman, and a degenerate of the infant, it disorganizes and ruins the family and menaces the future of the country." The following year, the Swiss voted, in a nationwide referendum, to ban absinthe, a ban that came into effect in 1910. Neuchâtel, home to the Val-de-Travers, was one of only two cantons to vote against the measure.

In the United States, even though the drink had never been particularly popular, the frenzy overseas made a ban inevitable. In 1912, the Department of Agriculture, having decided that absinthe was "one of the worst enemies of man," issued a ban that remains in force to this day. (As recently as 1999, a Navy circular threatened to court-martial any sailor found in possession of a bottle.) France, where the drink, despite widespread denunciations, remained most popular, eventually capitulated because of the First World War. In March, 1915, fearful of being overrun by a more vigorous nation, the French Chamber of Deputies voted to rid the country of the debilitating effects of endemic absinthism. "The absinthe drinker is content to crouch before the stalwart, honest, beer-bred Teuton," one writer commented. The ban was passed with an overwhelming majority. The great Pernod factory at Pontarlier was sold to Nestlé, which now uses it to manufacture strawberry milk.

Breaux's determination to reproduce absinthe in its authentic form intensified when he acquired, in 1996, a small supply of the liqueur dating from before the ban. Even today, there is a tiny market in this exquisitely rare and ruinously expensive drink—a vintage bottle typically sells for more than three thousand dollars. David Nathan-Maister, a British-based absinthe his-

torian and collector who sells bottles to a tiny community of enthusiasts, refers to the "pre-ban," as it's known, as the "coelacanth of drinks." He finds most of the bottles he sells in Switzerland or the South of France, generally at estate sales in small towns. (In northern France, few cellars survived occupation by the German Army in the Second World War.) From time to time,

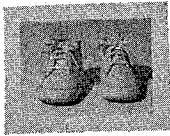
other bottles crop up around the world, such as one found walled up in a hotel in Tasmania. Nathan-Maister says that they are popular with Hollywood clients looking to impress dinner guests. "Nothing else has the same wow factor," he says. "A Mouton-Rothschild '45 simply hasn't got it."

Breaux tasted his pre-ban absinthe, and performed a chemical analysis, to give him an idea of what he was aiming at. Through archival research, he found the "protocols"—recipes followed by the great nineteenth-century distilleries—and stayed late in his lab after work to make absinthe according to their instructions. His results, he recalls with a laugh, were not impressive: "What I had there didn't seem convincing." He began to realize that the knowledge communicable in a recipe was useless without the tricks of the trade that distillers failed to include in their protocols, perhaps unwilling to write them down. Breaux said, "I had to relearn everything they had learned over a century of business."

Other effects of the ban have been harder to reverse. The fields where wormwood once grew around Pontarlier are now crowded with dairy cattle, and Breaux has spent years finding supplies of herbs and learning how to handle them. He claims that other makers' efforts are often compromised by changing patterns of production. He points out that star anise, a common ingredient in modern Swiss absinthe (the drink was legalized in Switzerland last March), today comes mostly from China. Natural variations from one harvest to the next further complicate matters. Each batch is unique, and he compares the job of fitting his herbs together into a consistent product to assembling jigsaw pieces that constantly change shape.

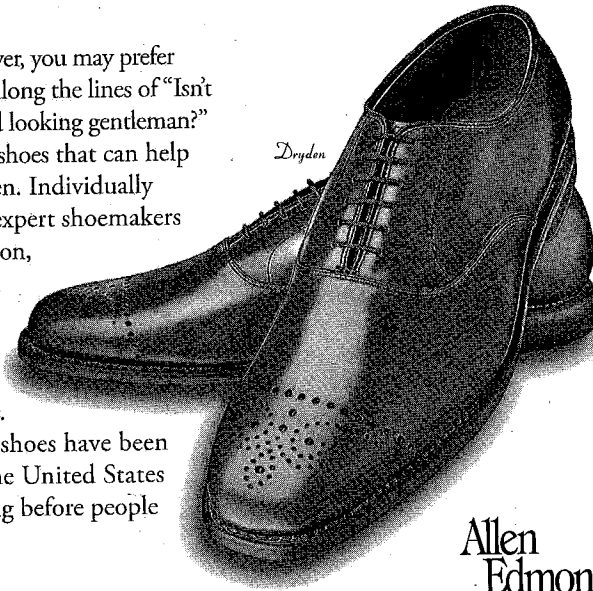
By the time of Breaux's first efforts,





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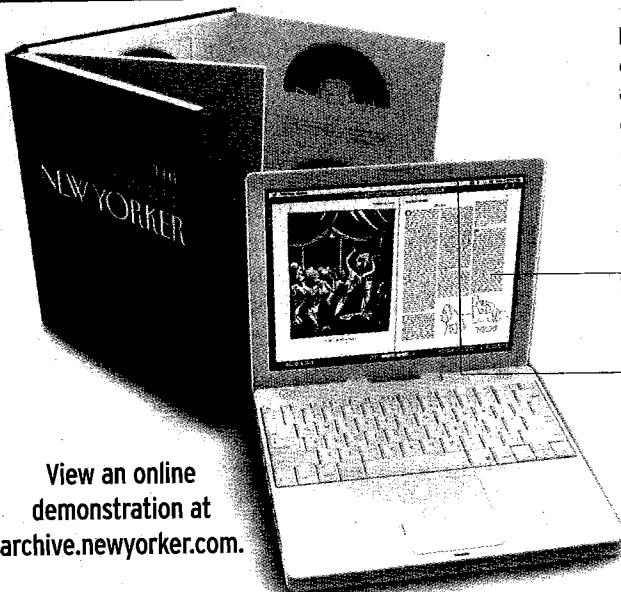
interest in absinthe had been building steadily. After the ban, clandestine production continued in and around the Val-de-Travers, and absinthe still attracted admirers. Hemingway did much to burnish the drink's legend—in "For Whom the Bell Tolls," Robert Jordan refers to it as "liquid alchemy." The current revival of interest can be dated to 1994, when Radomil Hill, a seventy-five-year-old Czech, began to market a drink called Hill's Absinth Liqueur. Many questioned whether this drink, colored a deep, vivid emerald, was absinthe in anything but name—and a misspelled version of the name at that—but there soon were dozens of imitators.

Whatever the content of his bottles, Hill was a shrewd marketer, and he succeeded in reaching both the Goth and frat-boy subcultures. The current trade takes place mostly on the Internet, thanks to a curious legal loophole. The Department of Agriculture's 1912 ban affected only sales and distillation of the drink; consumption and possession remain legal. Travellers returning to the U.S. with a bottle or customers buying it from Europe on the Internet are not guilty of any crime, though they could have their bottle confiscated.

To get a sense of the absinthes currently available, I visited Breaux's friend and distributor, Peter Schaf, in his apartment in the Montmartre district of Paris. The drapes and the sofa were a celadon green, and, in the window box, suspended above the Paris traffic, grew a wormwood plant. Schaf, tidy and bespectacled, looking more like a computer-science major than an absintheur, invited me to sit at a table cluttered with bottles, some ancient, some new, representing practically every absinthe available today.

Schaf disdains most modern absinthes, but during the next few hours he agreed to give me a tutorial. We began with Serpis, whose name and vivid red color evoked something dramatic and medicinal. "This is what Marilyn Manson drinks," Schaf said. He gave me some Spanish absinthe from 1955, a drink that Hemingway referred to. The taste was sweet, with a hint of licorice. This he followed with a scouring Portuguese *absinto* and a sweet, simple

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Swiss *bleue*—a liquor from the Val-de-Travers still known as a *clandestine*, even though it is no longer illegal—which tasted like a mountain breeze after a day in car-exhaust fumes.

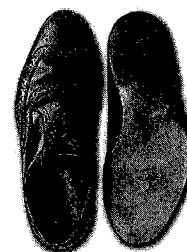
Next, Schaf produced a small, iodine-colored vial containing a sample of home-distilled American hooch. “What these guys are doing is really illegal,” he said. It was vile, with a strong, acrid aftertaste that Schaf ascribed to home distillation over a naked flame. Then Schaf poured me a drink with a deep-green color, like a first-pressing olive oil. “Don’t put water in this one,” he said. The nose was almost nonexistent, but after drinking it I wondered for several moments if I would wretch. The bitterness of the drink was so extreme that it seemed to gouge a channel down my tongue toward my larynx. “That,” Schaf said, grinning with the satisfied air of a teacher who’s proved his point, “is what you get when you macerate.”

He explained that the idea that absinthe should taste bitter is a misconception of the modern absinthe revival. Consumers associate unpalatability with authenticity, and assume that the worse the taste, the greater the effect. When wormwood—the second most bitter substance on earth, after rue—is soaked in alcohol, or macerated, it tastes very bitter. But distillation of a wormwood macerate—the process that Dr. Ordinaire hit upon—removes the bitter notes. Schaf speculates that most modern absinthes are not distilled, and are simply the result of mixing cheap grain or beet alcohol with various essences and flavorings.

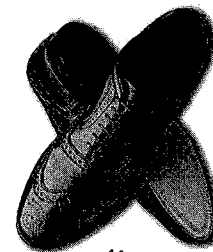
Schaf knows that he and Breaux are squeezed between the market’s low expectations and their own insistence on historical accuracy, and he worries that the acrid absinthes currently on the market may put people off the drink. Their business tactic has been to position their product as a gourmet drink, aimed at a niche market. Since starting production at Saumur, nearly two years ago, Breaux’s company, Jade Liqueurs, has brought out three varieties of absinthe: *Verte Suisse 65* is an attempt to faithfully re-create an absinthe made during the nineteenth century by the Swiss company C. F. Berger; *Absinthe Édouard 72* mimics the taste of the

drink distilled around the same time by Édouard Pernod; *Nouvelle Orléans* is made to Breaux’s own recipe and is designed to approximate the kind of absinthe that might once have been made in his home town. The bottles have elaborate labels redolent of the Belle Époque and sell for nearly a hundred dollars—more if you order some of Jade’s reproduction absinthe spoons and glassware. In countries where the retailing of absinthe is legal, such as England, Breaux’s absinthe is stocked at upscale outlets, like Fortnum & Mason. Americans can order bottles through a couple of Internet retailers. Breaux makes only about five thousand bottles each year, not enough to satisfy demand, and says he’s not interested in producing on a larger scale: “I want to make people realize that the drink is artisanal.”

The name “wormwood” notwithstanding, and despite its wood-like texture when dried, *Artemisia absinthium* is not a wood but a leafy plant with delicate yellow flowers. The name comes from its supposed vermicidal properties—a cure (“wode”) for worms. John Gerard, the English herbalist, wrote in his “Herball” of 1597 that wormwood “voideth away the wormes of the guts.” By the late nineteenth century, this wholesome reputation had been all but buried, and a scientific consensus emerged, according to which absinthe was the source of grievous mental and bodily harm, because of the wormwood oil it contained. Administered in sufficient quantities, this compound is highly toxic, a point that nineteenth-century doctors and scientists liked to demonstrate by injecting guinea pigs with concentrated essence of wormwood and watching the animals’ slow and agonizing death by convulsions. At the same time, the drink’s defenders saw wormwood as the most probable cause of absinthe’s purported lofty high. Wormwood was at once a source of danger and of delight. By the first decade of the twentieth century, the focus of the scientific debate had narrowed around the toxin thujone, which was isolated from wormwood oil—it is about sixty per cent thujone—and identified as the cause of the harmful



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effect. These days, it is a key element in absinthe's appeal. Postings on Internet discussion groups are full of tales of thujone-inspired highs, and several Czech producers tout the high thujone content of their product. Conversely, thujone also remains fundamental to the notoriety of absinthe and to its precarious legal status. (Only a couple of months ago, there was intense speculation about the role of absinthe in the disappearance of a young man who apparently fell from the side of a ship in the Mediterranean last summer, while on a honeymoon cruise.) When the French law pertaining to absinthe was revised, in 1988, it stipulated an upper limit of ten milligrams of thujone per litre in liquors sold as a "spirit" of absinthe, and thirty-five milligrams in a product labelled as a "bitter."

As recently as 2000, a group of researchers at Berkeley and at Northwestern University announced, in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, that they had identified the precise neurological basis of thujone's mind-altering effect—namely, that it blocked the brain's receptors for gamma-aminobutyric acid, a natural inhibitor of nerve impulses, and thus caused neurons to fire too easily, with an excitatory effect that could lead to seizures. The researchers had made their observations from studying laboratory mice and fruit flies that had been fed alpha-thujone. However, the study took for granted the thujone content in absinthe. The same year, Breaux, using gas chromatography, tested some pre-ban absinthe and found that it contained practically no thujone. He was astonished. "Everything I had learned had suddenly just fallen down," he recalls. He ran the tests again and came up with the same numbers. Then he ran similar tests on the absinthe that he had distilled himself; it, too, contained practically no thujone. Evidently, whatever thujone was present in the macerate did not make the journey out of the alembic, up the swan's neck, and down into the final distillate. "If you make absinthe the way you're supposed to, it's not even there," Breaux said. To his delight, his absinthe was legal according to the revised French law. Five years after this discovery, the results have

been independently corroborated by other studies. The thujone, Breaux says, "stays in the pot."

In the Combiér distillery, Breaux glanced at the hydrometer chamber and checked the emerging distillate; it was the color of pale straw. He dipped his finger into the stream, tasted, reflected, then diverted the remainder into a second barrel, or, as he called it, the phlegm bucket. (Because of French tax laws, Breaux must account for discrepancies between the amount of alcohol he purchases and the amount that leaves the distillery in bottles.) Then he transferred the still warm distillate into a large copper vat, for coloration—the final, and most fraught, stage of the process. Absinthe's distinctive green was always one of its main selling points, but absinthe's critics (many of whom were in the wine industry) singled out its color as emblematic of an unnatural, industrial product. Artificial shortcuts to this green are common, and Breaux, who insists on natural methods, winked and said, "Here's where we add the fluorescent green dye." He then dunked a hessian sack of herbs like an enormous tea bag into the distillate, and stirred it about with an enormous wooden paddle. Tendrils of green leached out from the sack, spreading outward and releasing an aroma of alcohol and chamomile.

Breaux dipped a small champagne flute in the newly colored distillate, into which he then poured a small quantity of water. The absinthe loughed in the glass—the water releasing herbal oils that turned the drink's clear, deep green to an opalescent peridot flecked with amber. He held the glass to the light with evident satisfaction. "People just can't believe that color is natural," he said, "But it is."

Leaning his elbows on the rim of the vat, Breaux handed me a glass, and watched as I drank. There was a dark, heady taste of mint offsetting the natural sweetness of anise; there were bold herbal, grassy floral notes, the slightest hint of spice, and a cloudy hint of bitterness, more a mild astringency than anything I remembered from my session sawing wormwood earlier that morning. "That's absinthe," Breaux said. ♦

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