

## Dancing With the Green Fairy - the Legends and Lore of Absinthe

The drink of choice for Roman charioteers, French courtiers and Parisian Bohemian artists alike, absinthe has a much storied past. Many of the tales surrounding the emerald green anise-flavored liquor are simply false, while others are shrouded in the mists and myths of time. Absinthe's legends and falsehoods (heresies, to fans) even caused it to be banned in much of Europe and North America for nearly a century. So what could be so dangerous, so mysterious, about a drink? Absinthe Legend #1 - Absinthe is made from the herb wormwood. The celebrated philosopher and mathematician Pythagoras prescribed wormwood soaked in wine as a relief from labor pains in childbirth. Not to be outdone, the father of modern medicine, Hippocrates, prescribed something similar for curing common ailments like menstrual cramps, anemia and to relieve the discomfort of rheumatism. (Was it the wormwood or the wine, I wonder, that made one forget the pain?) Absinthe Legend #2 - As do the Greeks, so do the Romans! Wormwood is a bitter herb, and it is thought that Roman charioteers were given wormwood steeped in wine to celebrate a victory in the Hippodrome. The bitterness of the wormwood wine was to remind them that even in glory, life has a bitterness that cannot be escaped. Pliny the Elder, the great Roman naturalist and author, touted absinthe (or is that wormwood wine?) as a cure for bad breath and no less an accomplishment than an elixir of youth. (Had Ponce de Leon known this, he could've saved himself the trip!) Absinthe Legend #3 - Apparently, a sort-of absinthe drink was common, and I do mean common, among the lower classes of Tudor England. The country's working-class folk guzzled flagons of a bitter herbed-based drink called "purl." You took some ale or beer, heated it with bitter herbs, added a bit of sugar to make it palatable and drank it down. The drink was thought to cure hangovers, and was mostly consumed in the morning. There are, however, reports of it being served in public houses and taverns on cold winter nights to stave off a chill. (Purl was considered too low-brow for court though, so King Henry VIII apparently had another cure for his hangovers.) Absinthe Legend #4 - Absinthe and its legends really take a life of their own in France. The first bit of French lore concerning the drink comes from the 17th century, when a renowned courtier of the king, a Madame de Coulange, was prescribed a concoction of wormwood and wine as a tonic for her upset stomach. She wrote to another of the ladies of the French court, Madame de Savigne, that her "little absinthe" was a remedy for whatever might ail you. (Again, one has to wonder if it was the wormwood or the wine that did the trick.) Absinthe Legend #5 - Absinthe gained its fabled nickname, the Green Fairy, in the middle of the 1800's. It was believed that the drink had curative properties, and it was first marketed as a curative and restorative. It was believed to cure everything from intestinal worms and colic to epilepsy and migraines. Given the name Green Fairy partly because of its abilities to restore health seemingly by magic, and for its dark, almost emerald green color, the drink found its way into the French Army's Africa campaigns of the 1840's. The soldiers used it as a preventive measure against diseases and as a water purifier. Absinthe's solo ability to prevent disease may have been a false belief, but its high alcohol content may have actually had some effect on water-borne bacteria. (You can lead a horse to water, but can you make him drink absinthe?) Absinthe Legend #6 - (This one is actually true!) Absinthe became so popular in France in the latter part of the 19th century that a phenomenon known as the *Heure Vert* or Green Hour arose. From 5pm to 7pm, it became fashionable to visit a cafe' or restaurant or bar and sip absinthe aperitif after absinthe aperitif. It became so popular that it was actually cheaper to buy absinthe than wine. And that's when the trouble started. (Doesn't trouble always follow when you mix your liquor and your wine?) Absinthe Legend #7 - Once absinthe took over the French population's drinking habits, French winemakers began to feel the pinch. In the 1890's, they suffered several years of devastating grapevine disease or blight. With the huge popularity of absinthe stealing what little profits they might have otherwise made, winemakers and vineyard owners began a disinformation propaganda campaign. Posters appeared claiming that "milk and wine are good for you but absinthe is the devil's brew." Absinthe's popularity with fringe elements of society, like the Bohemian artists and writers of Montmartre and Paris's Left Bank, didn't help its reputation any. It was said that van Gogh cut off his ear after an absinthe binge. Picasso and Toulouse-Lautrec painted it in their "wild, modern" paintings. Oscar Wilde, the "degenerate" playwright, was a huge fan of the drink. It was rumored that the thujone in the wormwood had hallucinogenic properties. Absinthe's days were finally numbered. The temperance movement sweeping Europe and America in the early 1900's took it on as the scapegoat for all alcohol, and subsequently all alcohol-related abuses. The lurid and gruesome "Absinthe Murder" in 1905 in Switzerland was pretty much the nail in the drink's coffin. A Swiss man supposedly killed his entire family after drinking absinthe. (The fact that he had also consumed vast quantities of wine and brandy in addition to the absinthe were left out of most news reports.) By 1910, absinthe was banned in Switzerland. America followed with its own ban in 1912. Finally, in 1915, by order of the French military, absinthe was forbidden in France. (Wonder what those French veterans thought of that!?) It took nearly 100 years before some of absinthe's reputation could be restored. Studies have proven that thujone is not a hallucinogenic. All of the drink's ill-effects are caused by the fact that at 140 proof, it'll probably make you see more than pink elephants. (Modern gin, vodka and most other liquors are only around 80 to 100 proof.) In 1988, France lifted its ban on absinthe, bringing it back into the fold, though it wasn't allowed to be marketed under its real name until 1998. The Green Fairy is now welcomed throughout Europe, in the US, and Canada, too. Absinthe's long, luxurious, and sometimes lurid, past is the stuff of Internet legend, though, as website after website tells and retells its tales, true or not.

## About the Author

Green Devil provides information, tips and kits on the making and history of [absinthe](#) throughout the ages. Learn more about the allure this beverage has held over the centuries or make your own absinthe alcohol and find out for yourself.