

# Absinthe minded: The green fairy makes a comeback

BY GREG KELLER SAUMJUR, FRANCE

**S**team rising from floor vents swirls around the base of century-old stills in the Combier distillery in the Loire valley.

Jean-Pierre Plisson, a veteran of nearly four decades at the distillery, moves around the stills, hefting sacks of pungent herbs and dried plants across the cold chamber to a scale, where he weighs out ingredients for a closely guarded formula for absinthe.

The herbal, licorice-tasting drink, which according to lore drove Vincent Van Gogh crazy and fired the poetry of Charles Baudelaire, is technically still illegal in France.

But an alliance of the distillery's owner, an American absinthe connoisseur and a New York law firm is working to bring the absinthe revival back home — gradually chipping away at legal restrictions rooted in myths about the supposed dangers of the “Green Fairy,” as the drink was once known.

After nearly a century of prohibition, absinthe has enjoyed a cult boom of sorts in the United States, where it became legal to produce and sell the spirit in 2007.

But the drink — which under French law must be called “Ab-

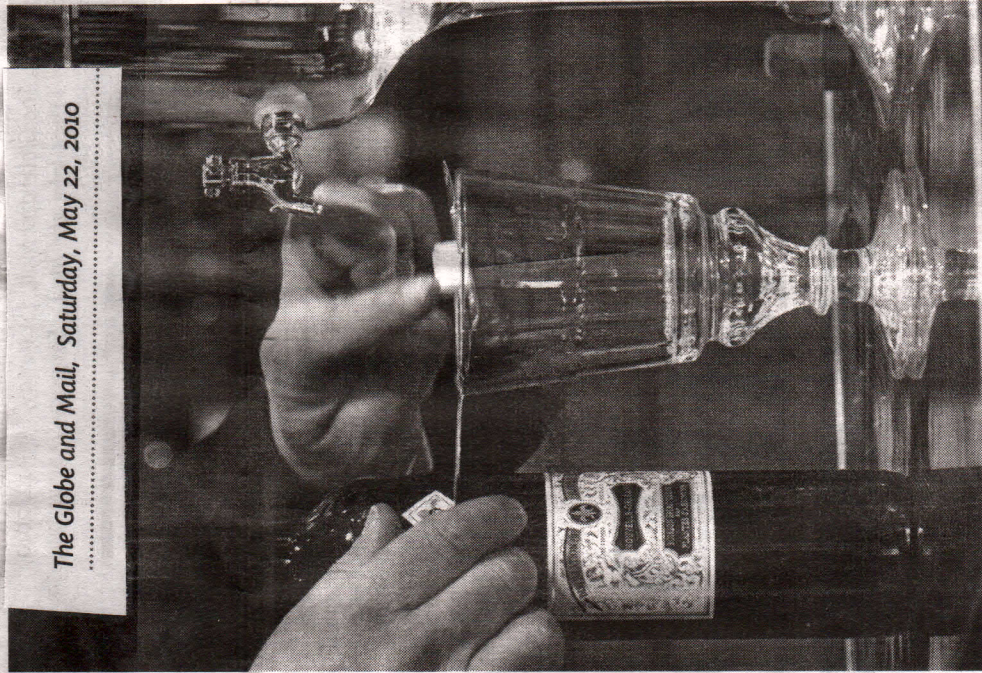
sinthe-based spirit” in order to be sold legally — remains extremely rare in French bars and cafes where it once rivalled wine in popularity until it was banned in 1915.

Part of the drink's attraction stems from the ritual involved in serving it — with an elegant glass or crystal fountain slowly dripping ice-cold water onto a sugar cube placed on a slotted silver spoon. The water and sugar drip into the glass, turning the spirit a milky white or soft jade colour. Today the most demand for absinthe is found in the U.S., France and Switzerland.

During the nearly century-long absinthe ban, Combier built a reputation for other alcoholic drinks, such as triple sec, as well as flavoured syrups used by bartenders to make cocktails.

The French law that banned absinthe is still on the books. A separate decree until recently defined absinthe as a beverage whose concentrations of three molecules found in the plants used to flavour it exceed certain thresholds. The proportions have been changed numerous times during the drink's prohibition — most recently in March, when efforts by Combier and its American allies persuaded the government to remove thresholds for two of the substances.

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**Absinthe, the herbal, licorice-tasting French spirit that fuelled (and allegedly corrupted) creative minds, is experiencing a resurgence — but is still illegal in its home country.** JACQUES BRINON/AP

As long as distillers like Combier limit their use of wormwood — one of the plants along with fennel and hyssop that give absinthe its characteristic taste — their drink is legal. It just can't be called absinthe.

“My recipes are traditional recipes,” says Franck Choisine, owner of the Combier distillery. He and his American partner, the absinthe connoisseur Ted Breaux, set out a few years ago to recreate absinthes that matched the original, pre-ban absinthes as closely as possible.

Experts agree. “It's absinthe, it's made with the same plants as back then, with essentially the same recipe,” says Fabrice Herard, an absinthe expert who is working on setting up an “Absinthe Road” tourism circuit in eastern France.

After much initial success, Choisine and Breaux had to stop production of some of their most expensive and sought-after absinthes, some of which go for over \$100 a bottle, after inspectors tested the drink and said it was illegal.

Ironically, the problem was not the wormwood but another of absinthe's ingredients: ordinary fennel.

Distillers like Choisine and Breaux were reluctant to cut down on the fennel to bring their absinthe into line with the regulations because of their desire to make a drink

that followed as closely as possible recipes from absinthe's heyday.

The limit also struck the distillers as absurd, as their research showed that to be poisoned by fennel, someone would have to drink enough absinthe to fill an Olympic swimming pool. “You'd be killed by the alcohol long before the fennel,” Choisine says.

They turned to New York law firm Nixon Peabody, which had helped overturn the U.S. ban in 2007. Arnaud de Senilh, the head of the firm's Paris office, liked the two distillers' case and led their fight to change the decree. The new decree re-moves limits on the amount of fennel and hyssop, and leaves unchanged the threshold for wormwood.

The change will permit Combier and Breaux to reintroduce the absinthe brands they were forced to stop making in 2006.

They still can't call their drink “absinthe” in France, though. The next step, according to the distillers and their lawyer, is to overturn the 1915 law.

» The Associated Press

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