

CHASING THE GREEN FAIRY

It is perhaps the most misconceived beverage on our liquor store shelves. French poet Arthur Rimbaud referred to absinthe as “the sagebrush of the glaciers,” and a multitude of fanciful titles have been bestowed on this choice drink of artists, writers and dilettantes. However, its surge in popularity — from its beginnings in the early 19th century to its minor revival at the beginning of the 21st — has left the cultural mainstay of Oscar Wilde, Eduard Manet and Baudelaire in a heap of rags.

“It’s a cocktail of terpenes,” says Greigh Swain of the startup distillery Whiteaker Spirits. “A terpene cocktail, actually, if you make a cocktail out of it. It’s all these essential oils from all of these plants.”

Swain, a long time drinker of absinthe (commercial and bootlegged, domestic and imported) and Eugene resident, has been in the process of starting up a distillery in the Whiteaker for the past few years — but an absinthe distillery requires a lot of time, labor and financing. There are a handful of absinthe distillers in Oregon, but the two most revered makers of *la fée verte* on the West Coast are from Washington: Marteau by Gnostalgic Spirits in Seattle, and Pacificque by Pacific Distillery in Woodinville. Both are available through OLCC liquor stores.

Most traditional absinthe recipes call for three main ingredients: fennel, anise and wormwood. The first two contribute to aroma and flavor, and the final element is a bittering agent. But there are literally hundreds — if not thousands — of recipes that exist for this particular digestif (before its popularization, absinthe was consumed as a digestive aid for those meaty, fatty bourgeois meals).

Inarguably, the biggest misconception concerning absinthe is the issue of thujone. Thujone, a compound found in wormwood, is allegedly the culprit for the purported hallucinations, insanity and fairy-lore surrounding absinthe. But it always occurs in doses too low to have any psychotropic effect. Rather, it’s the combination of all these herbs — along with other psychoactives like lemon balm, hyssop, Melissa, dittany and other herbs traditionally used in witchcraft and magic — that lends a very subtle, beautiful change in perception, says Swain.

“I like to call it rhapsodic,” he explains. “I feel like I can appreciate music and poetry better, and just watching the wind blow through the trees feels good.”

“It probably plugs the neuron receptors for opiates, which is why that was the second choice when people couldn’t get opium,” says Danae Spencer, a friend of Swain’s and a longtime absinthe drinker.

Swain takes me into his kitchen and pulls from the top cabinet an unlabeled bottle, half-filled with green liquid — a bootlegged bottle from a local absinthe distiller.

“The whole ritual thing with the fountain and the sugar cube, it’s a marketing ploy,” he says as he pours a few ounces into a glass, then slowly decants water over the green nectar.

I sip it down to the last few ounces, then quaff the rest lavishly. Leaving, trying to balance on my bike, Albert Hoffman’s famous bike ride comes to mind — it’s really nothing like that, but it’s good.

Absinthe is available at OLCC-regulated liquor stores, as well as various Eugene bars and restaurants like Marché, The Rabbit Bistro and Agate Alley Bistro. — *Andrew Hitz*



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