

# Demystifying ABSINTHE



## Through Education and Cocktail Programs, Operators and Consumers Become Less Green about La Fée Verte

By Kelly A. Magyarics

**W**hen absinthe hit U.S. store shelves in 2007 after the government lifted the ban, the buzz among cocktail historians, bloggers and innovative bartenders was palpable. After two years of the Green Fairy being back on the market, we check in with operators for best practices to generate continued interest and court new consumers, and also look at how the mixology community has embraced this distinctive ingredient.

“People are excited about something new and a little dangerous. Rumors and controversy as well as fun memories of absinthe-addled European vacations during college have fueled the fire,” claims Aidan Demarest, director of beverages and spirits at The Edison, a downtown Los Angeles establishment noteworthy for selling what is likely the most absinthe in North America at a freestanding bar — five cases a week.

In other words, operators may have been flooded with news and advertisements over the past two years, but absinthe is still new to many consumers — and romanticized by others. Ted Breaux, master distiller for French brand Lucid, the first label re-launched in the U.S., cites an evolution of consumer interest since its release. First attracted by its mystique, as consumers become better acquainted with it they increasingly learn to appreciate, he says.

“Absinthe is 15 percent distillation, and 85 percent education,” explains



The absinthe fountain at Chicago's NoMI Lounge is a conversation starter and educational tool.

Breaux, who believes long-term interest depends on the latter. Demarest and his staff at The Edison completed an intensive training course before adding absinthe to the cocktail program — sound advice for any bar or restaurant considering putting it on the menu.

### A Quality Education

First off, operators need to remind consumers that absinthe is not an illicit drug. The level of wormwood is almost non-existent in modern brands, which means the amount of alcohol necessary for it to have any mental effect would be far more detrimental than the wormwood itself.

On the flip side, its alleged history and high proof may give absinthe a “fear factor” appeal, notes Samira Seiller, senior vice president and director of marketing for Altamar Brands, which includes Kübler Absinthe. Operators can best capitalize on that appeal by conveying that “absinthe has a quality story that needs to be told,” according to Seiller. Focusing on the inclusion of its artisanal herbs and ingredients — of which not all consumers are aware — legitimizes the category beyond the hallucinogenic lore.

Because the American palate is not accustomed to the flavor of anise, Breaux counsels bartenders to remind patrons that absinthe is often an acquired taste, like Scotch. This can prevent alienating guests who say they don't like absinthe after the first sip.

Though Europe sees its fair share of ab-

sinthe worthy of its historical reputation, a much greater majority falls into the novelty product category: vodka with artificial coloring and flavoring. Fortunately, most brands released in the United States are high caliber, and operators fare well to seek them out. Breaux points out that if consumers first try a cheap, inferior absinthe, they may unfairly eschew the entire category.

### All About the Presentation

To the group sitting at a table witnessing a server carry an absinthe fountain to an adjacent table, nothing is as dramatic or show-stopping; to the operator, nothing is as great an educational opportunity. At NoMI Lounge in the Park Hyatt Chicago, director of food and beverage Paul Cardona displays the fountain in the wine cellar's tasting table each day, and it's a definite conversation starter. "You can see that guests are deep in thought trying to figure it out, which creates an opportunity for our team to personally give the explanation. It has definitely increased the impulse buy as well."

Like a bartender deftly flaming an orange peel for a Martini, the absinthe fountain is flashy, ritualistic and sexy. Seiller refers to it as "table theater." Cardona says there really are no labor or expenses issues with a fountain beyond the initial investment, and models both new and antique can be purchased online.

The communal vibe of a table of patrons being initiated and instructed about the drip also increases confidence. Bartenders measure out shots of absinthe, to which guests add ice water and sugar to taste. Nowhere perhaps but the sugar and cream station at a local coffee shop permits such self-serve options: a 3:1 ratio of water to absinthe renders a more potent potable, while a 5:1 ratio gives a drink similar in ABV to a Vodka Tonic.

The Edison offers both fountain table service and bottle service. But most unique is the presence of the Absinthe Fairy, who pushes a cartful of medicinal bottles filled with either prepared shots or full cocktails. It's a whimsical promotion as well as "a fun visual," notes Demarest.

Europe has a long history serving absinthe (and similar spirits like Pastis) the traditional way. But Steve Raye of Brand

Action Team, who represents the Austrian, Bohemian-style Mata Hari, believes absinthe's American future lies in cocktails. A smaller amount of absinthe balanced with other ingredients is often more palatable to many guests than a full glass of the louché liquid, especially for those unfamiliar with it.

Mixologists are increasingly featuring absinthe in inventive libations well beyond the rinse for a Sazerac, or Hemingway's absinthe- and Champagne-based Death in the Afternoon. NoMI Lounge features several seasonal absinthe cocktails, including the Park Rouge, with orange juice, ginger, lime, jalapeño and a salted rim; and the River Siene, which includes heady St-Germain, yuzu and pineapple juices, mint and lemon lime.

Unlike other more mainstream spirits, absinthe doesn't easily mix with everything. Breaux recommends experimenting with vodka, pineapple and cranberry juices, ginger, mint, coconut and almond. "Giving a mixologist absinthe to play with is like giving an artist purple paint. It's not at all like using black," he notes.

Edison's menu entices patrons to "please sit and enjoy the subtle effects of our cocktails infected with wormwood, otherwise known as 'Artemisia Absinthium.'" The aromatic, delicate Moonlight is a variation on a recipe from the 1930 Savoy Cocktail Book, with Kübler, gin, Luxardo Maraschino and St-Germain. And French 75 variant The "75" mixes Kübler with Calvados and pomegranate syrup. No matter the drink, bartenders need to keep the ratio of absinthe to other ingredients in check to avoid overwhelming more delicate components.

Absinthe's appealing mystique can unfortunately also be accompanied by a lack of information, which carries the potential to distance consumers. But operators who provide education both to staff members and guests and who use the spirit in appropriately fitting ways — both historical and contemporary — can foster new devotees of the Green Fairy in her many guises. **NCB**

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## Absinthe Styles

Part of guest education involves explaining differences among absinthe styles.

- Traditional or Verte absinthe garnered its popularity in Parisian cafés. Its green color and distinctive flavor results from the addition of herbs. When water is added, it looks milky green. Pernod and Lucid are examples of this style.
- Swiss absinthe, also called La Bleue, starts clear and becomes milky white when water is added. Kübler Absinthe exemplifies this style.
- Bohemian absinthe lacks historical roots, but its muted anise flavor and overt herbal notes often make it a more approachable style for guests with an aversion to licorice. It's useful in cocktails when mixologists prefer other drink ingredients to stand out. Mata Hari is a Bohemian absinthe.

### Contemporary Cocktails

#### Park Rouge

Courtesy of NoMI Lounge, Chicago.

- 1 ounce absinthe
- 1 orange wedge
- Half lime
- Fresh ginger, peeled and chopped to taste
- Fresh jalapeño, to taste
- Agave nectar, to taste
- Ginger beer
- Orange sugar, for garnish

Muddle the orange, lime and ginger in a shaker. Add ice and absinthe, shake with the jalapeño and agave nectar, and then strain into a rocks glass with ice. Top off with ginger beer and rim with orange sugar.

#### Mint Muse

Courtesy of Lucid Absinthe.

- 1 ½ ounces Lucid
- 2 ounces pineapple juice
- Muddled mint leaves
- Lime wedge
- Topped with Sprite or 7-Up



Muddle mint leaves with lime wedge and add Lucid. Add ice and pineapple juice and shake briefly. Top with Sprite or 7-Up and add mint sprig.