



By MAURICE ZOLOTOW¹

*Take neutral grape spirits combined with dried flowers and wormwood leaves, suffuse with vaunted aphrodisiac powers, mix in a history dark with tales of death and madness, and you have one of the world's most maligned - and misunderstood - aperitifs : **ABSINTHE**.*

ON August 28 1905, Jean Lanfray, a vineyard worker and day laborer in the little village of Commugny, Switzerland, awoke at 4.30 in the morning. He began his day with his usual eye opener: a shot of absinthe, to which he added three parts of water. Before the day was over, Lanfray would commit a series of horrible murders and, ultimately, he would bring about the downfall of a \$100,000,000 industry. Lanfray was a tough, burly peasant. He weighed 180 pounds. He was almost six feet tall and was in robust health. He was a Frenchman by birth. He had served his three years of military service with the Chasseurs Alpains regiment of the French Army. There he had learned two things: how to kill and how to drink absinthe.

At that time, absinthe was the best-selling before-dinner drink in much of the civilized world. It was - and is - an anise-flavored liquor of high alcoholic strength, preferably 136 proof. It is made by steeping various herbs in neutral grape spirits for eight days² and then redistilling the concoction.

¹ Maurice Zolotow (1917–1991) was a show business biographer, popularly known as "the Boswell of Broadway". His articles appeared in publications including Life, Collier's Weekly, Reader's Digest, Los Angeles, and many others. His book "Marilyn Monroe" was the first written on the iconic actress, and it was the only one published while she was alive. It's regarded as the first modern showbusiness biography. After graduating from the University of Wisconsin-Madison he took his first job at Billboard, then a publication covering not just the music business but all aspects of show business. Zolotow was an early jazz lover, and he gave Duke Ellington his first national review. He was described as an unusual mixture of intellectually erudite, enormously well-read, but fond of and absolutely au courant with contemporary and pop culture. He recalled seeing Houdini perform at Coney Island as a child; Zolotow wrote a novel, The Great Balsamo, based on him. Subjects of his other books include John Wayne (Shooting Star), Alfred Lunt and Lynn Fontanne (Stagestruck) and Billy Wilder (Billy Wilder in Hollywood). He wrote shorter profiles of celebrities ranging from Tallulah Bankhead to Walter Matthau to Grace Kelly to Milton Berle. A long-time alcoholic, he quite suddenly gave up drinking and smoking at the age of 57, joined AA, "made amends", paid off debts of every kind and in the process became what a friend called "the world's greatest dark horse candidate for terrific father". He was working on a memoir called "Famous People Who Have Known Me" at the time of his death. It's unclear on what references he based this remarkable article on absinthe, but it's by some distance the most comprehensive of the era, and, except for a few generally minor errors, surprisingly accurate.

² It's unclear where Zolotow got this figure. All the authoritative 19th century distilling texts (<http://www.oxygenee.com/absinthe/books4.html>) suggest a 24 hour maceration, not an 8 day one.

Among the 15 herbs in absinthe are the dried flowers and leaves of wormwood, a plant that grows about three feet high and is botanically related to our South-Western sagebrush. The German word for wormwood is *Wermut*, or vermouth; there are small amounts of wormwood oil in vermouth. The Latin for wormwood is *Artemisia absinthium*, and its oil is known as absinthol, hence the name of this elixir. For many years, a considerable number of French physicians and biologists had regarded the wormwood plant as deadly poisonous.

On what was to be a most eventful day in the history of drinking, Lanfray, 31, got dressed³. He lived with his wife and two children on the second floor of a farmhouse. His parents and his brother, Paul, lived downstairs. Lanfray had a second absinthe and water. He wiped his lips. He told his wife to wax his boots while he went about his chores, as he planned to go mushroom hunting in the woods the next morning. His wife grumbled something or other. During the past year, the couple had been constantly quarreling - about money, about her in-laws, about his drinking habits.

"Don't forget to wax my boots," Lanfray repeated. "And make it good, you hear?"

He went to the barn and watered the cows and let them out into the pasture. He returned and had some coffee and bread. The children - Rose, four and a half, and Blanche, one and a half - were still asleep. Lanfray went downstairs. He joined his father and brother. The three Lanfrays then began walking to the vineyards near the village where they were employed. En route, they passed the local auberge and Jean, a man who could not go very long without slaking his awesome thirst, went in. It was about 5:30 A.M. (a Swiss law-enforcement official, as we shall see, compiled a meticulous record of Lanfray's alcoholic intake that fatal day) and our man had, first, a *creme de menthe* with water, and then a cognac and soda. He worked until noon. He had brought bread, cheese and sausage for lunch. With the food, he downed two or three glasses of *chambertin*⁴. (This was not the famous Burgundian *chambertin* so prized by wine experts but a local homemade wine made from the district's *pinot noir* grapes and known in the patois as *piquette*.) Jean Lanfray's *piquette* was celebrated for being the strongest in the area. Lanfray could have paraphrased Will Rogers' famous remark about men and said that he had never met a drink he didn't like.

At three P.M., he took a wine break - two more glasses of his *piquette*. At 4:15, he accepted another glass of red wine offered by a neighbor. At 4:30, the day's work over, Lanfray, his father and his brother dropped into a cafe and he had a cup of black coffee laced with brandy. Later, when the police and psychiatrists delved into his behavior pattern, they found that he drank every day two to two and a half liters of *vin ordinaire* and two to two and a half liters of the stronger *piquette* - about six quarts in all. Besides this, he consumed several brandies and cordials plus one or two absintnes a day.

It was then about five P.M. Jean Lanfray and his father went home. There, they each polished off a liter of *piquette*. Jean's wife was in a bad mood. Besides having two small children to look after, she had to clean the house, cook the meals and help out with the farm chores. She asked her husband to milk the cows. They had a herd of 20 and sold the milk to a local creamery. Lanfray, having put in a hard day of drinking and digging, was not up to milking cows. He ordered his wife to go to hell and

³ What follows is probably the most comprehensive description of the Lanfray murders extant, and appears to be the primary source for the account given in Barnaby Conrad's book "Absinthe, History in a Bottle".

⁴ Curiously, the word is not capitalized by Zolotow.

milk the cows herself. Then he demanded hot coffee. She put the coffeepot on the stove. She did not say anything. In those days, women who knew what was good for them didn't get sassy with their husbands. Lanfray laced the coffee with a healthy slug of marc, a powerful brandy he made himself. His wife went outside. Sometime later, she returned and said she was going to take the milk to the creamery. Her husband complained that the coffee had not been hot enough. She shrugged. Suddenly, he noticed his boots under the sink - unwaxed. He gave her a further piece of his mind. His father started to leave, not wanting any part of this family quarrel. He said goodbye to his daughter-in-law. She shrugged insolently. Lanfray *filz* shouted that she should behave more politely to the old man. She shrugged again. He was enraged. He began yelling. And then she yelled back.

"Shut up!" he barked.

She lost her temper: "I'd like to see you make me!"

You would, would you?" he snarled. He went and got his old Vetterli rifle, a long-barreled (33.2 inches), bolt-action repeater that took a magazine of 12 cartridges.

"Don't do anything foolish," the old man pleaded.

"You stay out of this, Poppa, unless you want trouble yourself!"

Lanfray raised his Vetterli, took aim and shot his wife in the head. She fell and died almost instantly. The old man ran out, shouting, "*Au secours, secours!*"⁵ The oldest daughter ran into the room. She screamed. Jean shot her in the chest. She fell, mortally wounded. Next, he went to the cradle where little Blanche was sleeping. He killed the infant. Then he set out to take his own life. He held out the rifle and tried to aim it at his head, but it was too long. He got a string and tied it to the trigger, passed it behind the trigger bar, then held the free end of the string with one hand and the rifle by the barrel with the other hand. He was thus able to draw a bead on his own head, but he missed his brain; the bullet lodged in his lower jaw. Bleeding profusely, Lanfray tucked the corpse of his youngest girl under his arm. He went into the barn. He lay down on the ground and fell into a deep sleep, where the police found him and took him into custody. He was "dazed and incoherent," according to their account. He was taken first to the hospital in nearby Nyon, where the bullet was removed from his jaw. He fell asleep again at once. Later, he was taken to see his three victims in their coffins. Nurse Marie Blaser said that the murderer wept and moaned over and over, "It is not me who did this. Tell me, O God, please tell me that I have not done this. I loved my wife and children so much." Lanfray insisted he did not remember anything about the murders.

On September 3, 1905, a Sunday, the citizens of Commugny held a mass meeting in the schoolhouse. The villagers, horrified by the crime, learned after an autopsy on Mme. Lanfray that she was four months pregnant with a male fetus. The community had to find a scapegoat. Absinthe became that scapegoat.⁶

At the meeting, speaker after speaker denounced the liquor. "Absinthe," declaimed the mayor, "is the principal cause of a series of bloody crimes in our country." The citizens voted to petition the local legislature to ban absinthe in their canton of Vaud. Within a few days, 82,000 people signed—

⁵ "Help, help!"

⁶ For scans of the pioneering Swiss satirical journal "Guguss" dealing with the Lanfray murders and the subsequent anti-absinthe agitation, see <http://www.oxygenee.com/absinthe/journals6.html>.

including women, who did not then have the right to vote.

Medical men joined the outcry against absinthe. A committee of Swiss doctors gave the opinion that "more than all other alcoholic beverages, absinthe exercises an irresistible temptation to the drinker and compels him to drink too much." Psychiatrist Achille Weber, director of the Bel-Air Insane Asylum in Geneva, stated that 40 percent of the male patients admitted suffered from alcoholism. Since 1870, in fact, French physicians had noted a variety of symptoms they named alcoholism. There were, they said, three kinds of absinthe drinkers: (1) The majority, who had a single absinthe before dinner and suffered no bad effects. (2) The absinthist who went on periodic binges, during which he drank a liter or more a day. This type experienced unappeasable thirst, loss of appetite, noises in the ears, hallucinations and anxiety attacks. (3) The absinthist who was a daily heavy addict and consumed 10 to 12 ounces a day. After 20 years, he developed palsy, lost his hair and often experienced convulsive fits like an epileptic⁷. The most pronounced characteristics of the absinthe addict were his drawn and emaciated face and melancholy expression; his skin was dead-white, as white as a frog's belly. The ghastly pallor of the absinthist was noted by observers ranging from medical men to artists such as Degas and Toulouse-Lautrec, who painted the absinthe drinkers of Montmartre and the Grands Boulevards. A Degas masterpiece, *L'Absinthe*, shows a man and a woman at a table. The woman, with a glass of absinthe in front of her, stares vacantly, dreamily into space; her face is powder-white.

Obviously, then, Jean Lanfray was *not* an absinthe addict at all. He was not thin, his skin was not deathly white, he didn't have fits. He was in excellent health and his weight was normal for his height and age. Furthermore, he rarely drank more than two absinthes a day. But the guilt of a community had been aroused. For the Swiss, absinthe became a convenient lightning rod, a means of evading the complex psychological facts of murder, the facts of human nature, the ever-present power of evil in all of us.

Dr. Albert Mahaim, then the leading Swiss psychiatrist, a professor at the University of Geneva and the head of the insane asylum at Cery, examined the murderer in prison. He gave it as his opinion that "without a doubt, it is the absinthe he drank daily and for a long time that gave Lanfray the ferociousness of temper and blind rages that made him shoot his wife for nothing and his two poor children, whom he loved." The Commugny massacre was a front-page story in almost every country, and most Europeans were willing to believe that it was the absinthe that had really pulled the trigger.

Lanfray went on trial on February 23, 1906. The defense maintained that he had been in a state of absinthe-induced delirium when he killed and thus he was not mentally responsible for the murders. He was sentenced to life imprisonment. Three days later, he hanged himself in his cell. The Vaud legislature voted, 126 to 44, to ban the manufacture and sale of absinthe in the commune. In a special referendum in 1907, the Swiss voted, 23,062 to 16,032, to ban the manufacture and sale of absinthe nationwide⁸. Though other nations subsequently pro-hibited all forms of wines and spirits - Iceland (1908 to 1934), Russia (1914 to 1924), Finland (1919 to 1932), Norway (1916 to 1927) and the United States (1920 to 1933) - absinthe was the first and only potable ever to be singled out for total prohibition. In fact, the Swiss had not been consuming an inordinate quantity of absinthe: 110,000 gallons a year, or approximately 67 one-ounce glasses for every drinking adult - one every

⁷ <http://www.oxygenee.com/absinthe-effect/absinthism.html>

⁸ The referendum was in fact in 1908 (<http://www.oxygenee.com/absinthe/posters2.html>)

five days.

Felix Bonjour, a Swiss newspaperman who had covered the Lanfray trial, revealed years later that Monsieur Alfred Obrist, the prosecutor, did not, in fact, believe that Lanfray was an absinthe addict. Indeed, since Lanfray habitually drank six quarts of wine a day, with an additional six or eight ounces of brandy and cordials, absinthe was obviously only a small part of his intake. On the other hand, many persons who drink absinthe and also like their wine report that, for some mysterious reason, absinthe is able to intensify the power of wine. Lovers of absinthe used to say that "absinthe is a spark that explodes the gunpowder of wine." H. Warner Allen, the English liquor authority, warned: "Those who experiment with absinthe will do well to remember that it has the curious property of doubling the effect of every drink that is taken after it, so that half a bottle of wine at the meal which follows it will be equivalent to a whole bottle."

Absinthe, mostly of inferior quality, is still widely bootlegged in Switzerland. In the opinion of many Swiss lawmakers, the liquor should be legalized again and its manufacture made a monopoly of the state, since it is regarded as a necessity of life by many mountain climbers and skiers.

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Is absinthe really the most powerful and soul-stirring of drinks? George Saintsbury - professor of English and French literature at the University of Edinburgh and for some 50 years one of England's leading literary men - came to its defense in a famous treatise on wines and spirits, *Notes for a Cellar-Book*, first published in 1920 and now a classic⁹. A civilized, sophisticated man, Saintsbury hymned the praises of the beverage at a time when the League of Nations was considering a proposal to declare a world-wide ban on absinthe. Saintsbury described how absinthe "burns like a torchlight procession . . . the extraordinary combination of the refreshingness and comforting character in odor and flavor." Never, never, never had absinthe hurt him in any way, he swore. He lived to be 88. Nonetheless, he warned, the liquor was so concentrated that it shouldn't be "let loose indiscriminately and intensively in the human frame," for it was too potent, too poisonous. Saintsbury also suggested that nobody but a lunatic would drink it neat. Experienced drinkers recommend five parts of water to one of absinthe. (The French firm of Pernod Fils produces a version that contains all the traditional herbs except wormwood; it's labeled Pernod 51—meaning five parts water and one part 90-proof absinthe. Pernod, the first company to market absinthe commercially has since become a generic name for all high-proof anise -based liquors. Pernod Fils used to have a branch at Tarragona, Spain, where stronger, 136-proof absinthe was made from the original wormwood-flavored formula¹⁰.)

Ernest Hemingway has written the warmest tributes to the power of positive absinthe. He fell in love with the Tarragona variety on a trip to Spain in 1922 and for the rest of his life he revered the peculiar effects of absinthe, right or wrong, on the mind and genitals. In *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, hero Robert Jordan is having a belt of absinthe and water and somebody asks him what it is.

"A medicine."

"But what is it for?"

"For everything. It cures everything. If you have anything wrong, this will cure it."

⁹ Scans of the book can be found at <http://www.oxygenee.com/absinthe-drink/ritual2.html>

¹⁰ Pernod Tarragona bottles can be seen here: <http://www.oxygenee.com/absinthe/bottles1.html>

Hemingway said that when you sipped it slowly, it was an "opaque, bitter, tongue-numbing, brain-warming, stomach-warming, idea-changing liquid alchemy. . . . In this, the real absinthe, there is wormwood. It's supposed to rot your brain out, but I don't believe it. It only changes the ideas. You should pour water into it very slowly, a few drops at a time." Whiskey, Hemingway added, "does not curl around inside of you the way absinthe does. There is nothing like absinthe."

One of the constituents of absinthol, the oil of the wormwood plant, is thujone, C₁₀H₁₆O¹¹. Thujone is colorless and has a pleasant smell. But the taste is astringently bitter, as bitter as digitalis, cinchona quinine or hops. The prophet Jeremiah speaks truly when he describes "remembering my misery, the wormwood and the gall." It is said that the medicinal properties of the oil of the wormwood were recognized by Hippocrates, the Greek founder of medicine as we know it, who prescribed it for anemia, rheumatism and menstrual pains. Other Greek and Latin physicians recommended wormwood as an appetizer and a digestive. Paracelsus, the great medieval alchemist, supposedly was the first to note that wormwood cooled a fever, using it to treat malaria. After the Arabs invented the distillation of alcohol (about 900 A.D.), herb medicines were used in alcohol solutions, and wormwood, either alone or with other herbs, was widely dispensed.

In the hills and valleys of western Switzerland, the *Artemisia absinthium* plant grew tall and its leaves were unusually rich in oils. In the 1660s, the Marquise de Sevigne, one of the leading ladies of the French court, wrote to her daughter that while on a visit to Switzerland, a doctor had given her a "preparation containing absinthe that brings to my stomach much relief." From then on, she was never without it. "*Ma petite absinthe*," she said, "*est le remede a tom maux*." ("My little absinthe is the remedy for all diseases.")

Switzerland was always known for the quality of its absinthe and, before 1908, it exported about 3,000,000 gallons a year. Absinthophiles prized it for flavor and purity and willingly paid a higher price for it. The first known newspaper advertisement for absinthe appeared in a Neuchatel (Swiss) paper of 1769; a small notice offered for sale a *Bon Extrait d'Absinthe*.

The inventor of modern absinthe was Dr. Pierre Ordinaire, no ordinary man. A royalist, he fled France in 1790 and set up practice near Neuchatel where, like all doctors of that time, he compounded his own drugs. He often went for long rides along the mountain trails and he had observed the wormwood plant growing in wild profusion. He knew the medicinal value of absinthe. He began experimenting with infusions of dried absinthium along with other herbals. In 1792, he concocted a formula of 15 plants¹², including absinthium, Spanish anise, hyssop, Melissa herb (a type of mint), badian (Turkish or star anise), coriander, Veronica, camomile, persil and, of all things, spinach. The proportions were Dr. Ordinaire's secret. It was he who discovered that the value of absinthium was heightened when it was steeped in high-proof alcohol. He finally used 136-proof alcohol - which became the traditional proof of real absinthe. In France, French Pernod is still made pretty much a l'Ordinaire - though at lower proof and, as we said, without wormwood. In the United States, Julius Wile, under license from Pernod, imports and bottles domestic absinthe, also without wormwood, at 90 proof. (As in whiskey, the flavor is the same, regardless of proof.)

¹¹ <http://www.thujone.info>

¹² The available surviving manuscripts indicate that the original recipe had at most 8 ingredients, not 15.

Upon Dr. Ordinaire's death in 1793, he bequeathed his formula to his housekeeper, a lady known as La Mere Henriot. Mme. Henriot, a widow, was supposed to have been more than a housekeeper to the good doctor. Anyway, with her two daughters she set up a small absinthe shop. Among those who had tried her absinthe as a remedy for indigestion was a Major Henri Dubied, a Frenchman visiting Neuchatel on vacation. Dubied found that absinthe was also handy for chills, fevers, bronchial inflammations and low appetite. He took to having an absinthe every day before dinner and another one before retiring. Then he noticed a most delightful biological effect on himself. His mind became erotically excited when he had two absinthes and he found himself experiencing a thrilling and most potent agitation in his genitals.

"Ah, this absinthe is then an aphrodisiac!" he thought.

It was, indeed - one of the best and safest aphrodisiacs ever invented by the mind of man. It worked by changing the ideas, as Hemingway said, and not by irritating the sexual glands, as do most aphrodisiacs. Dubied often pondered the strange powers of this all-purpose medicine. He discussed it with his son-in-law, Henri-Louis Pernod, who agreed that it was a refreshing and invigorating drink - for the healthy as well as for the sick. In 1797, Dubied bought the original formula from the Henriot family. He and Pernod opened the world's first absinthe factory in Couvet, Switzerland. In 1805, H. L. Pernod, then head of the company, built an even bigger factory in Pontarlier, about 12 miles from Couvet. His oldest son ran the Swiss branch.

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The commercial breakthrough came about in a curious way. From 1844 to 1847, France fought a hard war to subdue the native tribes of Algeria. Many French soldiers suffered from malaria and the French army started issuing rations of absinthe as a febrifuge. The soldiers were told to acid a few drops of the liquid to their wine at meals. Over the years, hundreds of thousands of troopers developed a taste for the anise-flavored drink and its popularity later spread through France.

Toward the end of the century, Parisian society columnist Alfred Capus wrote in *Le Gaulois*: "Absinthe has become the favorite drink of almost every Frenchman." Paris café life was synonymous with absinthe. *Boulevardiers* would sit and talk in a café for six hours on two absinthes. To the average Frenchman, conversation - as a pure game of wit dueling - is one of the greatest of life's pleasures. And absinthe had the magical ability to stimulate the mind and assist the flow of ideas. In the fashionable cafés of the boulevard des Capucines, boulevard de la Madeleine, boulevard des Italiens, at Tortoni's, the Neapolitain, the Café de la Paix, one might observe Alfred de Musset, Dumas *filis*, Guy de Maupassant, Capus, Georges Feydeau, Tristan Bernard, Anatole France, the actor Lucien Guitry, the most beautiful kept women, the society ladies and the sportsmen of the Jockey Club. Then there were the Montmartre cafés such as the Lapin Agile, where the painters and sculptors hung out, the likes of Toulouse-Lautrec, Degas, Gauguin and Van Gogh, all sipping absinthe. (Van Gogh used to make his own absinthe cocktail—five parts water to one part absinthe and one part black ink. He insisted that black ink improved the taste.) There were also the lower-type cafés of the Left Bank frequented by struggling poets and writers: the Café du Theatre du Bobino, the Café Cluny, the Café du Rat Mort¹⁵.

¹³ For an illustrated 1886 article from Le Courier Francais on Montmartre's legendary Café du Rat Mort, popular with artists and writers by day and a lesbian hangout at night: <http://www.oxygenee.com/absinthe/journals4.html>

In the heyday of absinthe, the French garcon perfected the technique of pouring ice-cold water, drop by drop, into the drinker's glass. A long-handled spoon, whose bowl was full of small holes, was placed over the glass. A lump of sugar was put in the spoon and the water was slowly dripped through the sugar, which sweetened the bitter absinthe and also blended the water into the liquor so gradually that it did not separate¹⁴. This process is shown abstractly in Picasso's painted bronze sculpture, *Absinthe Glass*, circa 1914¹⁵.

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An absinthe taste is acquired. You'll find that, at first, it tastes and smells too much of anise - and it's bitter. Absinthe substitutes such as Pernod and Ricard have about five percent sugar syrup added and are less acrid. Once the taste for it is acquired, absinthe is splendid as an aperitif, as a digestive after dinner, as a nightcap and as a love potion. It is, I believe, without equal for seasickness or airsickness.

"In my opinion," says Dr. Samuel M. Pollack, a Harvard-trained chemist who formerly supervised Schenley's production of Absant, "it is the thujone in wormwood which acts as a brain stimulator and aphrodisiac. Thujone is definitely toxic. It is classified by our Government as a poison. Before the United States approves of any liqueur formula, it must be almost 100 percent thujone-free. Why do I say almost? Because vermouth also contains thujone. But when we use wormwood in vermouth, we extract it in wine at a low proof and we get a minute percentage of thujone - almost nil. Now, when wormwood is macerated 48 hours or longer in neutral spirits and then redistilled, the result is a high percentage of thujone. Thujone isn't soluble at low proof. The higher the proof, the more thujone."

Sometime after this conversation, I suddenly had a brain storm. All martini drinkers have long known that a dry martini packs a powerful kick - that it has a potent mental and physical effect beyond its alcoholic strength. I can't prove it scientifically, but my theory is that the "minute percentage" of thujone in vermouth, combined with the 90-proof or 94-proof gin, makes the dry martini the king of cocktails. And the martini even has a slight aphrodisiacal effect - which is enhanced by a few drops of absinthe. I remember a girl I knew in my bachelor days. An American, she had worked as a model in several haute couture salons in Paris and had acquired a taste for absinthe. We were at her place one evening and she asked me if I would like to have a martini as a nightcap. I said I was game, though I favored cognac and water in the evening, when the lights are low and the music is throbbing on the high-infidelity. She stirred up a pitcher of martinis and brought it on a tray with glasses and a bottle of absinthe. She set the tray on the coffee table, or, rather, the martini table. Now, I don't know whether this voluptuous creature had ever heard about thujone or knew that vermouth means wormwood, but she poured two chilled martinis and said she was adding a little absinthe to hers and would I like some in mine, and I said why not. I found out that night that "Absinthe makes the heart grow fonder." We slowly sipped our martinis and, frankly, I didn't like the flavor; but then, as the elixir went into my stomach and the minute fraction of thujone coursed through my veins and arteries, I experienced a slow surge of sexual hunger as she suggested I make myself comfortable. She kicked off her shoes and I slipped off my loafers and we

¹⁴ A video of the ritual can be viewed at <http://www.oxygenee.com/absinthe-drink/ritual1.html>

¹⁵ <http://www.oxygenee.com/absinthe/art1.html>

slowly continued sipping and stripping, and I didn't feel at all self-conscious, because it was as if everything rational was drifting out of myself and going outside to the hall elevator. You could say that a guilty conscience is that part of the human being that is soluble in absinthe. I experienced a more than usual desire for this girl, whom I customarily yearned for even without absinthe martinis, and we murmured things and sipped a second martini and were slowly kissing and caressing. By then, we were as naked as two absinthe-crazed jaybirds and we soon floated into her double bed.

I doubt that you can seduce a girl even by secretly slipping smuggled, 136 - proof absinthe into her martini. A genuine aphrodisiac doesn't work like that. You have to be in the mood and be with a girl whom you like and who likes you and whom you have probably gone to bed with often before. It is then, and only then, that you can make love with thujone in your blood—and you'll find that it's better that way¹⁶.

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As for the morning after. . . . The Suisse¹⁷ is regarded by many as one of the finest hangover cures known to man. New York's now-defunct Absinthe House had this recipe: the white of 1 egg, $\frac{2}{3}$ jigger absinthe, $\frac{1}{3}$ jigger anisette; shake well in cracked ice and serve in a fine crystal flute glass. For my taste, the Suisse is too sweet for a morning drink. Anisette by itself is a favorite morning-after drink of certain Parisians. The better class of Parisian cocotte often keeps a bottle of Marie Brizard Anisette in her refrigerator and, if you stay the night (which is not advisable unless you are rich or extremely horny, as it will set you back about 500 new francs), she will give you a slug of chilled anisette the next morning, and some black coffee and a buttered roll.

Another hangover remedy is the Absinthe Frappe. To a split of cool champagne in a tall highball glass you add one jigger of absinthe shaken vigorously in cracked ice. Victor Herbert wrote a melody honoring the Absinthe Frappe in 1906. The lyric, by Glenn MacDonough, runs:

*It will free you first from the burning thirst
That is born of a night of the bowl,
Like a sun 'twill rise through the inky skies
That so heavily hang o'er your soul.
At the first cool sip on your fevered lip
You determine to live through the day,
Life's again worth while as with damning smile
You imbibe your absinthe frappe.*

France's most celebrated absinthe addict was the poet Verlaine¹⁸. His best friend was Arthur Rimbaud, another of France's great poets. Enid Starkie, in her biography of Rimbaud, tells us how they spent most of their days in the cafes around the boulevard St. Michel, "drinking absinthe and

¹⁶ This passage of purple prose is probably the origin of the widely held – but erroneous - belief that absinthe has aphrodisiacal properties. The relationship between absinthe and enhanced sexual desire is unsupported by historical sources, and its appearance here is likely simply a result of the author knowing only too well who his target readership was.

¹⁷ For this, and other absinthe cocktail recipes see <http://www.oxygenee.com/absinthe-america/herbsaint.html>

¹⁸ Seen in Dornac's famous photo here: <http://www.oxygenee.com/absinthe/ephemera5.html>

living in a more or less permanent state of intoxication." Verlaine was rarely sober. It was absinthe they drank chiefly and absinthe was poison to Verlaine. It always brought out the latent cruelty in him and this he vented on his unfortunate wife. Verlaine - a homosexual - repeatedly tried to burn his wife's clothes and hair. He often stabbed her and choked her. During a long absinthe binge in Brussels in 1873, Verlaine got into a row with Rimbaud and shot him and was sentenced to five years in prison. He was released after serving two years. Verlaine described the effects of absinthe intoxication in many poems— the exaltation, the freedom from inhibition, the wildness of ideas and sensations, the sexual excitement, the raging fires of hostility - and also the terrible hangovers and the physical ravages of it. It was Verlaine who called absinthe "the green fairy," "the green goddess," "the green muse."

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Like every other country, France has a temperance movement, the *Comité National de Defense Contre L'Alcoolisme*. It has been propagandizing against liquor for years but has not had much success, because France is a nation that produces and cherishes the world's greatest wine, brandy and aperitifs. But the savage, senseless murders committed by Jean Lanfray in 1905 shocked all Europe and all Frenchmen. Absinthe became the "devil's liquor." And the League Against Alcohol raised the slogan: "Absinthe makes you insane and criminal." A weird coalition of the right wing and the left wing was forged against absinthe. Edouard Drumont, author of *La France Juive* and France's leading anti-Semitic intellectual, attacked absinthe as a "tool of the Jews." (In 1894, Arthur and Edmond Weil- Picard, who were half-Jewish, had bought a controlling interest in Pernod Fils.)¹⁹ Leon Daudet, a political reactionary and a leading journalist, cried, "I am for wine- and against absinthe, as I am for tradition and against revolution." But the revolutionaries were also against absinthe. Marxists never wanted anybody, especially the workers, to enjoy life, since happy proletarians don't make revolutions. Absinthe, rather than religion, was the opiate of the French people, they declared. Yet the rational voice of conservatism, which expressed the majority of French political and intellectual life, was for absinthe.

"*Une magnifique et précieuse liqueur!*" cried one senator. "*Vous êtes une execrable absinthophile,*" charged the opposition, led by Georges "The Tiger" Clemenceau, the fiery premier of France during World War One. In 1907, the Chamber of Deputies met against absinthe; it took testimony from doctors, chemists, toxicologists and psychiatrists. After the investigation, it voted, 15 to 9, that absinthe was innocent of all the charges made against it. The green goddess had been reprieved - but not for long. The anti-absinthe propaganda continued. The French sustained terrible casualties during the first year of the war and absinthe was again the scapegoat. It was seriously argued that France had been weakened by her low birth rate and that wormwood made men impotent.

On March 16, 1915, in an atmosphere of national hysteria, absinthe was again declared a toxic product²⁰. Its manufacture and sale were forbidden. The Pernod factory at Pontarlier, after 110 years, was sold to Nestle's, the Swiss chocolate and cocoa company. Another absinthe house, Hemard, at Montreuil, near Paris, went into herbal wines. The ban continued at war's end, but French distillers were permitted to make absinthe without wormwood. In 1926, Hemard merged

¹⁹ The long-standing French anti-semitism of the era was considerably inflamed at the time by the Dreyfus Affair (<http://www.oxygenee.com/absinthe/books9.html>).

²⁰ <http://www.oxygenee.com/absinthe/posters3.html>

ABSINTHE
Maurice Zolotow
Playboy, June 1971

with Veil-Picard, successors to Pernod Fils, and, in 1928, with Pernod Pere et Fils, another absinthe house. Today, at 87 rue de Paris, Montreuil, the firm is prospering more than ever before.

And what of the *Comite National de Defense Contre L'Alcoolisme*? It, too, is still flourishing, with its headquarters now located at 147 boulevard Saint Germain, in the heart of the Saint Germain-des-Pres quarter, a bottle's throw from some of the most wonderful cafés in Paris - the Café des Deux Magots, La Rotonde, the Brasserie Lipp. I interviewed Dr. Andre Robert when he was head of the Comité. He is an urbane and intelligent man who seemed in favor of good French Bordeaux or Burgundy with one's dinner and who was happy that absinthe had been virtually put out of business but who despaired of doing very much about other products of the liquor traffic. He regarded the increasing consumption of Scotch whisky by the younger generation as most deplorable.

Yet, vindication of a sort came to absinthe when, a few years ago, Edouard Frederic-Dupont, vice-president of the National Assembly, presented to Jean Hemard, then-president of Pernod Fils, the silver cup awarded by a society of French gourmets. On this happy occasion, Monsieur Frederic-Dupont pronounced: "If we are all men of joy in France, if we are optimists despite these difficult times, if we have a tendency to believe in a future even though it doesn't always appear shining, eh bien, it's because from father to son, as you know, we have been in the habit of drinking this anise-flavored liqueur. And it may well be that someday when one will look up the word France in *Larousse*, one will read: 'A Frenchman is someone who knows how to appreciate Pernod!'"



Maurice Zolotow at the age of 30.