

Uncorked

The Green Muse turns the mind to pleasure

Uncorked By Jurgen Gothe

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Years ago, Mississippi country-blues crooner Mose Allison had a song called "Lost Mind" it wasn't his; Percy Mayfield wrote it about losing "my mind in a wild romance", which had a wonderful line in it about somebody being "sweet and cruel as homemade sin". Diana Krall picked it up more recently, but the song, and especially that line, has always stuck in my brain along with all those other '50s lyrics. (How is it we can't remember our partner's birthday but all the words to Roy Orbison songs are ineradicable?)

When I took my first sip of absinthe in early summer 2000, after schlepping a couple of bottles back from London, where the stuff was back on sale for the first time in decades the song came right back. For one thing, sin was amidstips of the liquor's very name.

Then came the shock of the taste and the buzz: 80 percent alcohol by volume. Actually, the first shock came at the price: they were asking £40 for the little bottle. They got it. What price formerly unobtainable, now Bulgarian-made (shudder), antifreeze-coloured, licorice-bite booze?

The Green Muse, they used to call it, and they said it made you crazy. Crazier I mean, look at Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec; he wasn't all there to begin with. Modern absinthe has drawn its share of bad press since it got its start in late-18th-century Switzerland. Europe especially, for some reason, countries containing lots of mountains has a long and exuberant tradition of making great booze out of stuff the rest of the world happily overlooks: roots, bark, leaves, flowers, and other near-compost.

The original recipe for homemade sin is attributed to a French doctor with the delicious nom de drogue of Dr. Pierre Ordinaire. It had mint and lemon balm in it, together with fennel, hyssop, star anise and wormwood. Some people think that's the stuff you pick up on the beach, with all those holes in it. No wonder it makes you crazy. Not so—wormwood is just a little plant of the daisy family (a more kitchen-common cousin would be tarragon) with a lot of thujone in it.

Thujone was thought of as a hallucinogen, but recent studies have shown that's not the case. We don't know what it is that makes you crazy; most likely it's the power of suggestion. Whatever it was, various authorities in Europe, South America, and the United States decided not to risk widespread craziness and so they banned absinthe in the early part of the past century. One Henri Louis Pernod had started to produce it commercially a century before the bans; his firm eventually left the wormwood out and today's Pernod is, well, Pernod, a trademarked proprietary product. End of story.

Is not.

Enter enterprising distillation iconoclast Frank Deiter of Okanagan Spirits in Vernon, one of the world's smallest distilleries but with perhaps one of the world's largest portfolios. Ask him how many products he puts through his gleaming little copper still and he'll have to think hard to list the lot. Last time I looked, there were more than 30 eaux de vie, fruit brandies, grappas, and other spirits, including absinthe. Virtually all of them are distinguished by international awards, gold medals, and accolades, but few are available for sale beyond the city boundaries of downtown Vernon.

Absinthe, eh? Canadian, eh? Who'd have thought it? Okanagan Spirits does a green one, called Absinthe Taboo, and a white, Absinthe Blanche. The difference is in the colour, the green being derived from chlorophyll from the mulberry tree. Traditionally, absinthe was some hue of green, so it made sense.

Taboo took a silver medal first time out, earlier this year at the World Spirits Awards in Klagenfurt, Austria. (Deiter entered 10 products and copped 10 medals, three of them gold.) The tall, slender bottle has a screened-on label and a cork-bottomed stopper. It's half a litre of that great green sin.

First release? Perhaps in about a month, says Deiter, working out the details. Where, apart from the distillery? I'll let you know; that's still being worked out too. Price? Somewhere around \$55, which puts it in the running with the other three absinthes listed in B.C.: a 55-percent version for \$65, one "absinthe strong" for \$53.60, and a 70-percenter from Hill's for \$81.75. None of them is made in Canada, let alone B.C.

Taboo Absinthe Blanche is produced from this list of goodies: fruit-based alcohol, artesian-well water, wormwood, green anise, star anise, hyssop, lemon balm, fennel, and petite wormwood. (All the botanicals come from Switzerland.) Clear, bright, it has a heady but pleasant licorice bite and a sinful assault on nose and tongue. At 60 percent, shoot it before or after dinner, very cold. I love it iced. It is a bold and assertive spirit on the Chartreuse flavour wheel, definitely not for the Dr. McGillicuddy's schnapps bunch.

The green Taboo has a different aroma sweeter, woodsy, more herbal and carries considerable bitterness; subtler and more elegant, it's more likely to please the cognoscenti.

So there's your fin d'été quest. Lock down a source of something unique for your taster friends: B.C. made absinthe before Halloween to spook the guests.

I'm working on some new recipes, including one made with O2, the world's first wait for it! sparkling vodka. But in the meantime, the absinthe martini is quite nice: gin and vermouth, to your personal ratio, and a quarter-teaspoon of absinthe, frappé. The earthquake is aptly named: one ounce each of gin, bourbon, and absinthe, also shaken with ice.

This one would fly along the Granville strip: ask for a Pedra and watch the bartender's eyes cloud over. Drink it in the name of your dog or your last romance the one where you lost your mind over someone sweet and cruel, et cetera and here's how: one part each of vodka, tequila, black rum, Baileys, absinthe, and grenadine syrup. Oh yeah, it's sweet, and probably a lot crueller than you think. Good night and good luck.