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## 'Bad boy' liquor

After 95 years, infamous drink absinthe returns to American bars

Kathy Flanigan/Milwaukee Journal Sentinel  
Tuesday, May 27, 2008

Scott Williams thinks absinthe fits in perfectly with the French atmosphere of Lake Park Bistro, where he is the general manager — and, for this night anyway, chief merrymaker.

For 95 years, the licorice-tasting liquor has been in exile. So Williams is more than happy to introduce the drink to his Milwaukee clientele.



Dave Gahl of Milwaukee sampled Lucid Absinthe Superieure. [It was sweet and almost had a licorice flavor to it,] he said. [We will see if I start to see green fairies later.]

He stands behind an elegant absinthe fountain, a clear vessel filled with ice and water and surrounded by four spigots.

To serve absinthe, he pours two ounces of the liquor into a glass and positions it under a spigot. He places a slotted spoon on top of the glass and a sugar cube on top of the spoon, and then he opens the spigot. Cold water eases over the sugar cube and into the glass, dissolving the cube and sweetening the licorice-tasting liquor and revealing the herb-based alcohol's pale green color.

Williams hands glasses to a trio of customers on the other side of the bar. But he doesn't stop there. With a bottle of champagne in one hand and a bottle of Kubler Absinthe in the other, he mixes the champagne with absinthe and gives them something new to taste.

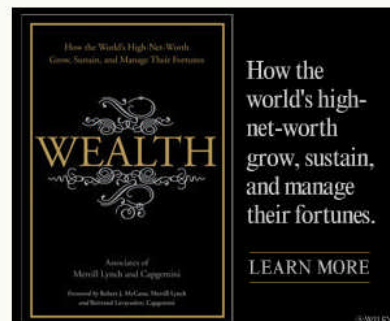
The concoction tastes like it sounds — a fizzy Good & Plenty comes to mind — but that doesn't really matter.

Lake Park Bistro is one of several bars and restaurants that recently put the once illegal and still infamous absinthe on the drink menu. (Lake Park Bistro serves it only at the bar).

At first, customers are curious, attracted by signs announcing the return of absinthe, or because they already are members of the absinthe cult, having experienced it in Europe, where absinthe has been served for centuries.

People like Gabe Piloczewski. Sitting at one end of the bar at Palomino in Milwaukee, the 22-year-old with his baseball cap perched backward on his head orders a shot of Kubler Absinthe to go with his bottle of Blatz.

"I actually drink absinthe regularly," said Piloczewski, who learned about it after his father had friends send absinthe from Europe wrapped as stationery supplies.



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## 'GREEN FAIRY' IS BACK

Absinthe's reputation has always had a touch of mystery, and the legend swirls much like the liquor does when it meets with cold water.

It gets its distinctive flavor from the herbs anise and fennel, with which it is distilled, and its name from a third herb called grande wormwood (*Artemisia absinthium*), which contains the compound thujone.

Thujone, once considered to cause hallucinations or epilepsy, is regulated in the United States. Absinthes available in the U.S. contain less than 10 parts per million of thujone, which is considered thujone-free by the government.

It's thujone that helped absinthe get its bad-boy reputation and its nickname — "the green fairy."



Legend says Vincent Van Gogh cut off his ear after an absinthe binge, and it was the beverage of choice during France's Belle Epoque cafe era where Impressionism was born.

Piloczewski, who drinks the 106-proof alcohol straight up, said he tested the absinthe reputation, downing 14 shots in an hour. He says he heard later that he acted silly but didn't hallucinate.

Among the trio at Lake Park Bistro, Andy Torkelson, 23, Melissa Sandgren, 23, and Hannah Torkelson, 25, had all tried absinthe when they were overseas. They accepted our invitation to taste Lucid, an American brand made in France, and Kubler, a Swiss brand.

At Lake Park, both brands sell for \$9.

"I feel like in Europe it was a little stronger," said Hannah Torkelson, who liked it enough to want to bring some home. "We would sneak it back (from Europe) in Listerine bottles."

The tools for serving absinthe: 2 ounces of absinthe, poured in a glass; a fountain filled with ice water; a slotted spoon; and a sugar cube.

All three say they would consider drinking absinthe for a special event, and preferred Kubler to Lucid. They saw it as a shared kind of experience, and thought the liquor would be something they would order before a meal (it is considered an aperitif) or as dessert after a meal.

But they wouldn't drink it like, say, Jagermeister.

## MIXING AND MATCHING

Along with Williams, the trio tries to think of fun ways to drink absinthe — perhaps as a Jell-O shot, one says.

They're game as Williams begins mixing the absinthe first with champagne (too dry) and then with cassis, a black currant-flavored liquor.

"It looks prettier than it tastes," Hannah said.

At Palomino, General Manager Tim Farley is playing with a few absinthe recipes of his own. He's considering serving it with Swiss Miss or Nestle's chocolate mix — something that would give absinthe a smooth taste but fit in at the kind-of-alternative, kind-of-retro-cowboy bar and restaurant.

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One idea intrigues him. The original B-52 drink, which includes Baileys and Kahlua, had a splash of absinthe on the top that servers would light on fire.



Another way to serve absinthe is to light the sugar cube on fire, as shown here, prior to pouring the ice water.

At Palomino, Douglas Bay accepts our invitation to try absinthe for the first time. The bartender sets a nearly full glass in front of the man with the shock of white hair, taps a slotted spoon on top, followed by a sugar cube that he sets on fire. The caramelized sugar makes its way into the cloudy drink and Bay takes a gulp.

"It has a hell of a licorice finish," Bay said. "It has a slightly medicine taste at the beginning. The initial smell doesn't help. The drink is better than the smell."

He isn't finished. His first try was the \$8.50 Lucid. He next tries the \$6 Kubler straight up. He finds the licorice taste is delayed, but that his belly is warming quite nicely.

"I think it's more of a novelty thing," Bay said after two drinks. "But I wouldn't be opposed to having it in the house."

At the other end of the bar, Palomino's cook, Jason Harter, calls absinthe "a tasty beverage." Although he's not a fan of black licorice, he orders the drink often, usually with the sugar cube presentation. Sometimes, however, he requests The Asylum, a blend of equal parts gin, absinthe and grenadine.

#### STILL BEING DISCOVERED

There was some interest in absinthe when Karma Bar & Grill in Milwaukee hosted a tasting party more than a month ago, but there haven't been a lot of takers since.

"Not many people are accustomed to it," bartender Andrew Schnell said.

Although Karma offers the full decanter presentation, the bar has had more success selling Kubler absinthe in a mixed drink. The Van Gone is a blend of champagne, peach schnapps and absinthe. The Red Fairy is absinthe mixed with Red Bull.

Schnell said the most popular drink is The Velvet, a blend of Ketel One Citron vodka, absinthe, pineapple juice and lime juice.

"It's probably the easiest and smoothest to go down," he said.

All of Karma's absinthe drinks cost \$8.

Schnell thinks it's the specialized taste of absinthe that can keep people from requesting it, but he expects that could change come patio season.

"That's when people come in and ask for something unique," he said.

#### THIRSTY? TRY ABSINTHE

If you haven't tried absinthe before, it's probably wise to taste-test the licorice-flavored alcohol at a tavern or restaurant since a bottle can be pricey.

We found a 750-milliliter bottle of Lucid absinthe for between \$58.99 and \$61.99 and a 1-liter bottle of Kubler absinthe for between \$48.99 and \$54.99 at liquor stores.

Bars charge anywhere from \$6 to \$9 for a glass of absinthe.

The method of serving the opaque green liquor varies as broadly as the price.



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#### ABSINTHE RECIPES

Absinthe has an extremely strong taste no matter how it's prepared.

The traditional method includes adding sugar to the absinthe, but in dramatic fashion. Assuming you don't have an absinthe fountain at home, you can do it this way: Pour a large shot of absinthe into a glass. Place a slotted spoon over the glass and set a cube of sugar on the spoon. Slowly drip ice cold water through the sugar into the absinthe. The drink should turn cloudy.

Other recipes from [www.absintheonline.com](http://www.absintheonline.com) include:

#### PANACHEE

- 1 shot absinthe
- 1 shot anisette

Fill with ice water as in traditional method.

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#### SAZERAC

- 1 1/2 ounces absinthe
- 2 ounces cognac or rye whisky (if you wish)
- 3 dashes Peychaud's Bitters
- 1/2 teaspoon sugar

Shake with ice and strain into an old-fashioned glass. Garnish with lemon peel.

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75 (created in World War I)

- 1 teaspoon absinthe
- 2/3 ounce Calvados French apple brandy
- 1/3 ounce gin

Shake with ice and strain into a canteen.

#### ERNEST HEMINGWAY'S 'DEATH IN THE AFTERNOON COCKTAIL'

- 1 jigger absinthe
- Champagne

Pour absinthe in champagne flute, then add iced champagne until the mixture turns opalescent.

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EARTHQUAKE (originally Tremblement de Terre; thought to have been created by Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec)

Combine equal parts absinthe and cognac in a brandy snifter, add an ice cube and a splash of water. Or serve the blend in the traditional absinthe fashion.

#### ABSINTHE MARTINI

- 1 1/2 ounces Martini red vermouth
- 1 dash absinthe
- 1 dash orange bitters

Shake with ice and strain into a cocktail glass.

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#### ABSINTHE FRAPPE

- 1 shot absinthe
- Ice water

Pour absinthe into a tall glass containing crushed ice. Top with ice water and shake. Add a spoonful of sugar or simple syrup for taste.