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## On the Hunt for the 'Green Fairy'

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After more than 90 years, absinthe has returned to area bars. Loved by [Oscar Wilde](#) and Henri Toulouse-Lautrec, rumored to drive men crazy and cause vivid hallucinations, absinthe was banned in the United States in 1912 and in most Western countries because of its alleged psychoactive properties. But restrictions were lifted last year, and drinkers can once again consume the luminous green liqueur known as the "green fairy."

If it weren't for the ban, though, I'm not sure absinthe would have the same mystique. The herbal black licorice taste isn't for everyone, and it's a potent potable: Most of the new absinthes are about 100-proof, or 50 percent alcohol; rums and vodkas, by comparison, are in the 40 percent range.

The best introduction to classic absinthe comes at Central Michel Richard, where the bar offers three kinds: Kùbler, from Switzerland; St. George, a boutique brand made in California; and Lucid, an American brand that's raising eyebrows with its 126-proof absinthe. Central's house absinthe cocktail, La Fee Verte, is incredibly simple (Kùbler, water and sugar), but its preparation is pure theater.

Bartenders place absinthe in a small glass, then carry it to an ornate water pitcher known as an absinthe fountain. Set on a pedestal, the glass jar has four old-fashioned spigots. After the glass is set under a spigot, a slotted spoon is laid across the mouth of the glass, and a sugar cube is placed on top of the spoon. The bartender turns the faucet, and water slowly trickles down onto the sugar, through the spoon and into the glass. As the water and dissolved sugar mix with the absinthe, the liquid turns a cloudy, milky green.



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"It brings everything to a halt at the bar," manager Justin Guthrie says. "It draws a lot of attention."

Since the 19th century, bartenders have been using absinthe as a key ingredient in the classic Sazerac cocktail, along with rye whiskey, sugar water, bitters and a lemon peel. Absinthe isn't really mixed into the drink; it's used to coat the glass, then dumped out. Bartenders turned to pastis (a licorice liqueur) when absinthe was banned, but many have switched to the original recipe. The best one I've tasted in Washington comes from Chantal Tseng at the Tabard Inn's cozy bar. It's hard to keep absinthe from overpowering other flavors, even when there's only a trace, but Tseng's cocktail stays in delicious balance. Her secret? The Tabard's house-made simple syrup and plenty of fresh lemon zest. "It's all about the aroma," she explains. "You need to be able to smell the absinthe and the lemon zest."

Other lounges and nightspots are finding new ways to mix absinthe into more traditional recipes. Absinthe plays a bit part in mixologist Tom Brown's Dawn Over Manhattan at Cork wine bar. With aged rye whiskey, an herbal, spicy vermouth and whiskey-aged bitters, the subtle anise taste comes through well and adds a fullness and viciousness to a cocktail that's otherwise lacking.

My favorite nightcap comes from Said Haddad, the bar manager at Café Saint-Ex. His Lost Year cocktail combines Kûbler with a kiss of St-Germain elderflower liqueur, which adds a sweet floral scent and a touch of pear. The taste is smooth and lush, and my only disappointment is that it's served in a tiny sherry glass. Haddad says he's worried about customers who don't know the drink's strength. "You've heard of a lost weekend?" he asks. "There's a reason it's called the Lost Year."