

Zeitschrift: Swiss review : the magazine for the Swiss abroad
Herausgeber: Organisation of the Swiss Abroad
Band: 31 (2004)
Heft: 3

Artikel: Absinthe : return of the "green fairy"
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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-906818>

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Return of the "green fairy"

It was said to turn artists into geniuses and mild-mannered farmers into unscrupulous murderers: the "green fairy". Now Switzerland is aiming to lift its almost 100-year-old ban on absinthe and place the demonised cult drink on an equal footing with other liqueurs.

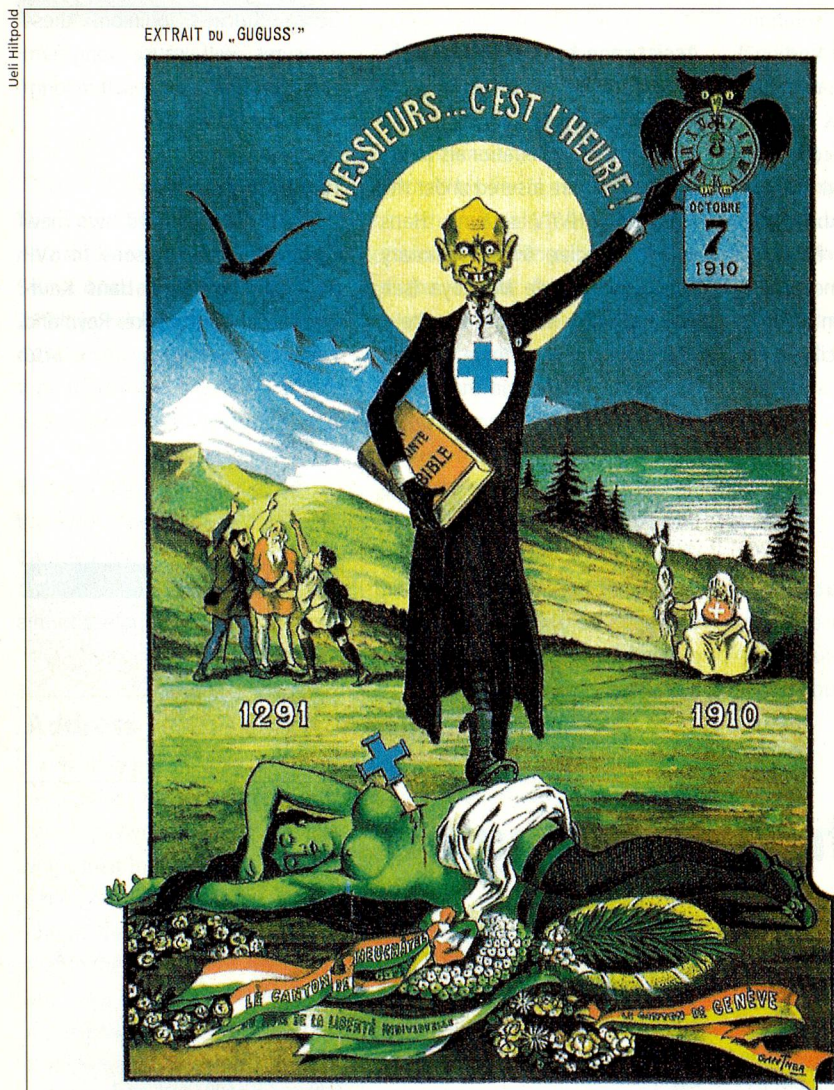
GABRIELLE KELLER

Absinthe, aka the green fairy, Artemisia, Jura milk, the morphine of poets: the evil spirit is poison-green, the alleged source of both inspiration and dementia. Above all, it is the stuff of legends, myths and all kinds of tall tales. Absinthe was the tonic of Bohemia and the preferred tippie of Parisian avant-garde society. Its praises were sung by none other than Oscar Wilde, Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, Pablo Picasso, Alfred de Musset and Charles Baudelaire.

The bitter, herby liqueur tastes of wormwood and most closely resembles French pastis. Depending on light conditions and recipe, it turns milky white, green or blue when diluted. Absinthe is made from wormwood (*Artemisia absinthium*), star anise, fennel and herbs. According to folk wisdom, it possessed not only the attributes of other fortified alcoholic drinks, but was also believed to cause epilepsy and blindness. As to its infamous intoxicating effect, if indeed it exists, opinions differ. Some attribute this to the very high alcohol content, some to the narcotic effect of thujone, the principal toxic agent found in the wormwood plant.

In our grandparents' days, most of Europe believed that absinthe was no ordinary spirit and banned the use of its ingredients. But a more subjective view was taken of its hallucinogenic effect. Charles Baudelaire had his hair dyed green to declare his love of absinthe, and claimed that the drink gave "life a celebratory hue". Picasso's inebriation was blue-tinged, leading to his "blue" period – just as Vincent van Gogh had his "yellow period".

Artistic quibbles about the colour of the drink are one thing. But the horrific murder which turned the Swiss against absinthe and ultimately led to a legal ban on absinthe in Switzerland, is quite another. It happened in 1905 in the Vaudois village of Commugny. Drunk on absinthe, Jean Lanfray shot his pregnant wife and two children. Opinion-leaders of the day laid the blame firmly on absinthe. In 1907 the sale of the herbal liqueur was prohibited in the cantons of Geneva and Vaud, and in 1908 Swiss voters decided to enshrine the ban in the federal constitution.

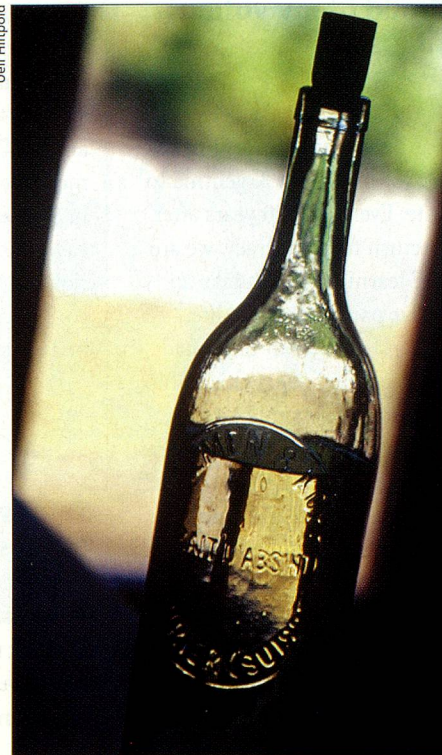


LA FIN DE LA "FÉE VERTE"
(Suppression de l'Absinthe en Suisse)

The killings shocked an entire region: On 28 August 1905 Jean Lanfray, a farm labourer in Commugny near Nyon, shot his pregnant wife and their two children. Opponents of absinthe took advantage of the murders to demonise the spirit.



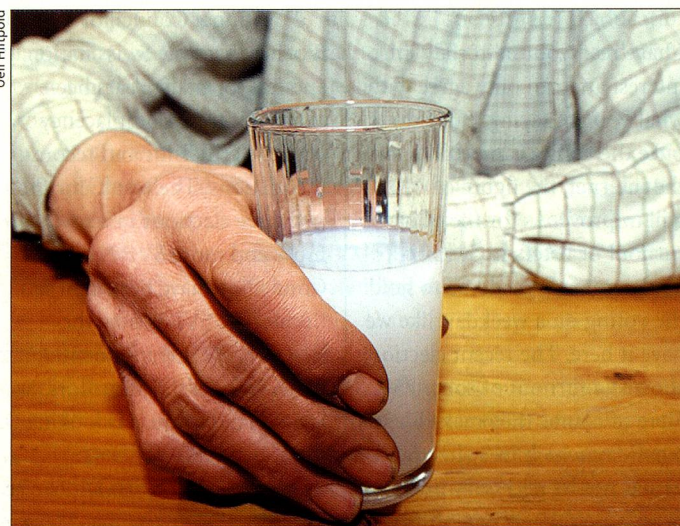
Absinthe is illicitly distilled on this farm in Val-de-Travers/NE. Authorities estimate that some 10,000 liters of absinthe are produced each year. The State Council's Economic Committee hopes that legalisation will turn absinthe into a legally protected advertising vehicle for the region, and create jobs.



The prohibition of absinthe was eliminated from the federal constitution back in 1999. Now it is to be deleted from the Food and Alcohol Law. Picture: a bottle of dark absinthe.



A glimpse into an illicit distillery: A farmer at his small kitchen still. The first absinthe distillery was started up in 1805 by Henri-Louis Pernod, whose pastis became world-famous.




In diluted form, absinthe is milky-white and tastes of aniseed. Will the secrets of Val-de-Travers disappear with the legalisation of absinthe? Many Neuchâtel farmers reluctantly believe so.

The fact that the murderer was said to have consumed not only two glasses of absinthe but several bottles of wine a day, was conveniently concealed by the vintner lobby. After all, the mass manufacture of absinthe had depressed sales of wine in western Switzerland and France so much that many wine growers and dealers feared for their

livelihood. So Jean Lanfray's horrific act played right into their hands.

Another event that belies the image of absinthe as a source of poetic inspiration is the famous episode of Vincent van Gogh's ear: he is believed to have cut it off when drunk on absinthe. Whatever the truth, Switzerland is now changing its food law to allow

absinthe to be sold alongside plum brandy. Cause for concern? Perhaps! At any rate, tabloid journalists are already claiming to have seen some starlet or other surreptitiously clutching a bottle of absinthe. 

Translated from German