

# Absinthe's Allure

The “green fairy” draws consumers interested in cocktail history

There are still many misconceptions surrounding absinthe even though it's been legal in the United States since 2007. Thanks to the works of late 19<sup>th</sup>-century and early 20<sup>th</sup>-century Bohemian writers and artists, absinthe earned a reputation for being a mind-altering, dangerous spirit—a legacy that's still somewhat intact today, though many modern studies have shown that absinthe isn't any more dangerous than other spirits.

“Many guests still believe that absinthe has hallucinogenic properties, or they'll ask me if it's still illegal to consume,” says Jessie Marrero, bar manager at Washington, D.C.'s *Libertine*. The venue carries more than 30 different absinthe brands, which account for roughly 25 percent of bar sales. *Libertine* owner Amy Bowman adds, “Even though absinthe has been legal for seven years, it still has mystique—it's a little naughty to drink absinthe.”

To spread understanding and appreciation for absinthe beyond its sordid history, suppliers and supporters stress consumer outreach. “Education is key,” says Mathieu Sabbagh, international director for Pernod absinthe. “We need to do more to instruct bartenders, who can then pass information along to consumers.”

Steve Ciavola, national vice president of sales for St. George Spirits, says well-made absinthe cocktails help to dispel misconceptions. “Once consumers try absinthe in a cocktail, they discover its unique qualities and are more willing to try other cocktails that feature it,” Ciavola says, citing the Sazerac as the perfect introduction to absinthe. This classic drink uses just a rinse of absinthe to give consumers a taste without overwhelming those who may be new to the flavor of anise or the high alcohol content of many absinthes. Such cocktails can lead consumers to become more adventurous and seek out absinthe-forward drinks like *Libertine's* take on the classic *Death in the Afternoon* (\$12), comprising Pernod absinthe and Segura Viudas Cava.

“Absinthe is a key ingredient in cocktails, especially classic recipes,” Pernod's Sabbagh says, noting its popularity among mixology enthusiasts. “Absinthe is a historical spirit with a

delicate taste that appeals to consumers. It can be enjoyed in the traditional ritual with the sugar cube and water drip or in hundreds of drinks.”

At *Maison Premiere* in Brooklyn, New York, absinthe is the star of the show. The bar and restaurant carries 27 absinthe brands, offered both in the traditional drip method (ranging from \$11 for Kübler to \$18 for Jade PF 1901) and in original cocktails. The *Great Bambino* (\$13) features pineapple-infused St. George absinthe verte, *Distillerie Purkhart Poire Williams eau de vie*, yuzu, coconut and orange flower water, while *The Commodore* (\$14) blends Duplais absinthe verte, *Rhum J.M Agricole Blanc*

40-percent alcohol-by-volume rum, lemon and grapefruit juices, and *Angostura* bitters.

Kyle Beaugard, general manager at *Restaurant 1833* in Monterey, California, points to the experience of drinking absinthe as a major appeal for guests. “Our Russian-style absinthe service (\$15 to \$45) is very popular,” he explains. “Guests take part in a presentation where the absinthe is ignited in a snifter glass, caramelized and then poured while still on fire into a glass of fresh-squeezed orange juice and house-made bitters. Once all the liquid is poured from the snifter into the orange juice, guests inhale the absinthe vapor from the snifter before enjoying the cocktail.” In addition to this method, *Restaurant 1833* also offers absinthe via the traditional water drip ritual (\$15 to \$45).

“The use of absinthe has been growing steadily,” St. George's Ciavola says. “It's certainly more

prevalent today as bar operators look to provide a unique drinking experience for their customers.” *Libertine's* Marrero has also noticed absinthe appearing on more bar menus nationwide as a result of the mixology boom of the last decade. “Most craft cocktail bars now carry at least one bottle of absinthe to add depth to their cocktail service,” she notes. Bowman adds that the traditional drip method of serving absinthe appeals to today's bar patrons. “The ritual of the dripping water over the sugar cube is mesmerizing and filled with anticipation,” she says. “It isn't a quick drink to serve or imbibe, which increases its allure.” **mw**

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Washington, D.C.'s *Libertine* serves over 30 absinthes and offers the traditional ritual (fountain pictured).