

Recently I was at the Memphis wine auction benefiting the Brooks Museum. Lots of great wine flowed and lots of money was raised for art. Towards the end of the evening, someone offered me some Absinthe from the turn of the century. I tasted it and wow! I almost forgot to write this article (I was Absinthe minded).

So where, what, and ___ is this Absinthe all about? Well, the first Absinthe was created in the 18th century (the 1700's) and came from the Czech Republic. It became so infamous that it was banned in 38 countries.

Absinthe is usually jade-green in color and high in alcohol (usually 50-70%) with a high proof (sometimes as high as 140 proof). For reference, Jim Beam is 80 proof.

If you haven't tried it, Absinthe is a unique liquor with lots of complexity. The flavor comes from different herbs used in the distilling process. Its color comes from the chlorophyll in the herbs. Among those plants used are: anise, hyssop, veronica, fennel, lemon balm, angelica, and wormwood.

It's the wormwood that creates Absinthe's popularity and contains thujone. It's the thujone that provides the psychoactive ingredient that produces the unique and mysterious effects.

Absinthe has been featured for its effects in a number of movies, magazines, and television programs. It has been used for centuries for its unique ability to cause the light uninhibited effects of alcohol while keeping people energized too. It was the drink of choice for famous playboys like Casanova and Oscar Wilde. Artists used it for inspiration and relaxation. Picasso and Van Gogh painted under its influence. It was even rumored that Van Gogh cut off his ear under the influence of Absinthe.

More about thujone. It has a structure similar to THC. New research indicates that thujone blocks GABA-A receptors which prevent brain cells from firing. This is what causes the "wide awake drunk" effect. Don't underestimate the effect of 140 proof alcohol, either. The two together make for a powerful combination.

Absinthe tastes like the herbs that are in it, though it mostly tastes like anise or licorice. Surprisingly, it doesn't burn on the way down, but there is an almost immediate rush.

Is it legal? In the United States it is. Absinthe is not considered a controlled substance, but it can't be sold in bars, restaurants, wine shops, or liquor stores. In Europe it is legal as long as the thujone content does not exceed 10 milligrams. Our neighbors to the north make it completely legal and in Canada you can find Absinthe in liquor stores.

Of course, if you're a smoker or drive under the influence you don't care, but some might ask, is it safe? The answer is yes. The thujone content of all commercial Absinthe is low enough that it is safe. As with all alcoholic beverages, one should practice moderation, and homemade Absinthe has been known to be fatal.

I always say that if you want a buzz, drink hard liquor or beer. If you want to enhance the flavors of your meal, drink wine. That still goes, however there is an old Irish saying that goes "There is no such thing as too much wine—it's just that the human body was never designed to handle a decent amount of it." Those that say you can drink too much wine usually like carrots.