

# Absent From The Bar: Absinthe's History, Absinthism, and Anti-Absinthe Movements in the United States 1840-2007

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## WHAT IS ABSINTHE?

Herbal alcohol goes back to ancient Egypt, but absinthe as we know it was invented around 1790 in Switzerland. The two essential ingredients are high-proof alcohol and wormwood (which makes it green), although other herbs are frequently included as well.

## ABSINTHE'S BEGINNINGS IN THE UNITED STATES

Absinthe came over to the United States around the turn of the nineteenth century. At that time it was new and expensive, which made it interesting for the upper class and for creative elites. Absinthe was originally nicknamed the "Green Fairy" because of its green hue. Allegations of hallucinations came later, although there is not enough thujone (the active ingredient in wormwood and absinthe) to cause hallucinations. Absinthe wasn't particularly popular in the U.S. until the 1840s, when it became affordable, at least the cheaper brands, for the working class.



## ABSINTHISM

Alcoholism was a recognized issue in the nineteenth century, but absinthe was thought to cause a much worse disease known as absinthism. Absinthism was supposed to cause a much longer list of symptoms than regular alcoholism, including issues like hallucinations, softening of the brain, and a much earlier death.

## RELEGALIZATION OF ABSINTHE IN THE UNITED STATES

Absinthe, and particularly the inclusion of low-levels of thujone (the chemical in wormwood) in drinks was made legal again in the U.S. in 2007. Compared to the decades long anti-absinthe movement, the efforts to relegalize absinthe was relatively brief, from 2003 to 2007, (also as opposed to the continued illicit consumption by some throughout its ban). In that time, a Swiss absinthe company, Kübler and a French company called Viridian Spirits worked with a team of lawyers in Texas to seek the relegalization of and resumption of importation of absinthe in the United States.

## SCOPE:

This paper seeks to explore the history of absinthe in the United States, as well as anti-absinthe movements and the invented illness of absinthism. The primary focus of the project is from the beginnings of absinthe's popularity in the United States (in the 1840s) to its banning in 1912 to its relegalization (in a form) in 2007.

## THESIS:

Absinthe in the United States was treated differently and actively singled out as worse than other forms of high-proof alcohol, with campaigns against absinthe specifically, absinthe bans before Prohibition, and relegalization well after Prohibition.

## ANTI-ABSINTHE MOVEMENT

The anti-absinthe movement was connected to but not synonymous with the temperance (prohibition) movement as a whole in the nineteenth century. The anti-absinthe movement began in the 1860s and correlated with the continued drop in absinthe prices and the increased use and abuse of absinthe among the working class. The anti-absinthe movement was global and also particularly large in France and Switzerland. The social movement was also aligned with religious revivalism and women's rights. Absinthe was banned in the United States in 1912.



## EVOLUTION OF ABSINTHE'S CONSUMPTION IN THE U.S.

Absinthe was originally, in the United States, a drink of the elite and of creatives like writers and artists. Absinthe arrived in the U.S. at the turn of the nineteenth century, but did not become particularly affordable or popular until the 1840s. Beginning in the late 1840s and peaking in the 1890s, absinthe was increasingly a cheapening drink of the working classes. As absinthe became more popular with working class and the poor, it became an increased target of prohibition movements. Absinthe's demonization specifically correlated with its consumption by the economically marginalized, and became less a target after it returned to being a drink of creatives during its ban.

## WHY WAS ABSINTHE CONSIDERED WORSE? A FEW THEORIES:

1. Absinthe was a relative new drink and foreign – whiskey, rum, and gin all had comparable alcohol content but had an established place in the American liquor cabinet.
2. The anti-absinthe movement correlated with absinthe's change from a novel drink of the elite to a drink over the overworked lower classes.
3. The anti-absinthe movement was distinct from but related to the regular Prohibition movement, and could have been gateway prohibition for bigger movements: 1912 was absinthe's ban and 1920 saw the more general alcohol Prohibition.

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