

# DABBLING WITH CREATIVE SPIRIT

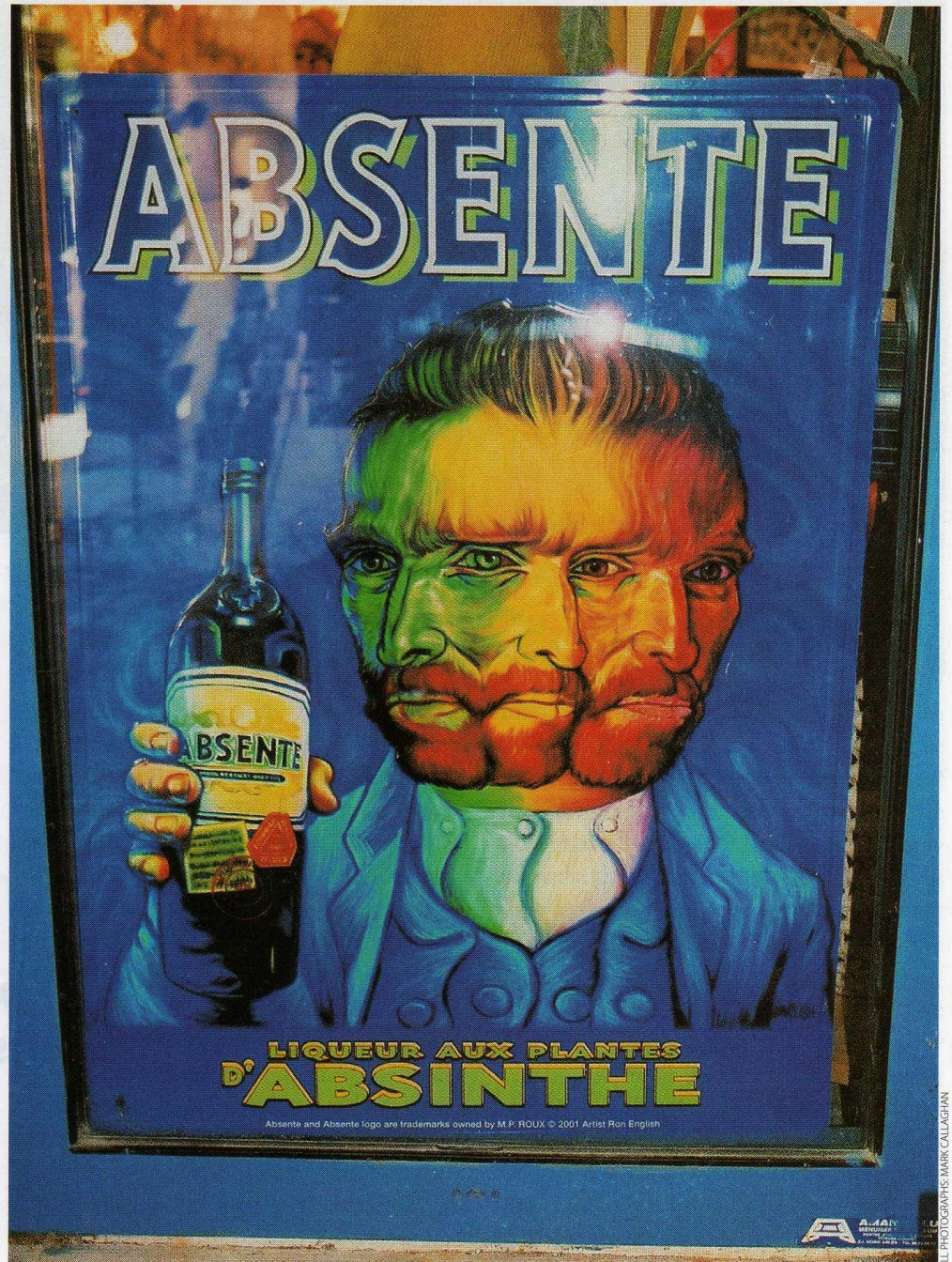
Absinthe, or the *Fée Verte*, is claimed to be the cause of both insanity and artistic inspiration. **MARK CALLAGHAN** explores the truth, history and myths of this potent green liqueur

Nothing tastes better than the food and drink in France, so in a new series starting this issue we are taking a look at some of France's delicious traditional flavours. From absinthe to Armagnac, and mushrooms to mirabelles, French Flavours will uncover some of the history and traditions of these French specialities and give you something new to get your teeth into.

THE TIPPLE OF CHOICE FOR THE 19th century decadents is making a comeback. The controversial alcoholic beverage, absinthe, can now be found in every fashionable bar. The *Fée Verte* (Green Fairy) is being aided rather than hindered by an assumed reputation for danger, hallucinogenic properties and a stockpile of artistic associations. But is the reputation deserved, or has absinthe been misunderstood since its conception? If you drink a measure, will you experience the torment and the talent of the impressionists?

The story of France's difficult relationship with absinthe begins in the town of Pontarlier during the French Revolution. In 1792, a resident of Pontarlier created a recipe for absinthe that would be sold to one Henri Pernod, a man with an increasingly successful distillery. Immediate prospects for the strange green beverage were uncertain until the 1830s war with Algeria escalated consumption.

Initially issued to French troops as a malaria preventative, the taste proved so popular that soldiers demanded more when returning home. *L'heure verte* (green hour) was quickly established in Parisian cafes, usually around the hours of six and seven, when bourgeois society took their positions, diluting their absinthes with water and adding sugar to sweeten.



Absinthe, with its blend of bitter wormwood and pleasant anise, was the drink of choice for a bourgeoisie yearning to identify with the soldiers of the Battalion d'Afrique. But it was also affordable to the lower classes, including the writers and artists that so characterised Paris in the

second half of the 19th century.

The relationship between art and absinthe has always been fiery; the drink supposedly destabilising already fragile temperaments, and in turn, helping to influence the artists of the impressionist and post-impressionist periods. In 1859,





Edouard Manet's controversial *The Absinthe Drinker*, was refused by the Salon Carré du Louvre on the grounds that it was 'immoral'. Edgar Degas' *L'Absinthe* would also enjoy controversy and further establish absinthe as a fuel for inspiring the artist as well as being a subject matter in itself.

French poetry in the 19th century was also fertile ground for the emerald nectar. For those who felt life differently, absinthe provided the opportunity to alter their perceptions still further. It was thought

to be drunk', endorsed absinthe as part of his manifesto of decadence—a manifesto that called for writers to be intoxicated in order to truly experience the artistic consciousness.

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is open to question, as by their very nature, the poets would, and did, find alternative intoxicants. A popular song, however, contains lyrics that suggest absinthe was common and highly significant to their output: 'One was Verlaine, the other Rimbaud, they drank absinthe like you drink water, for you don't drink water to write poems.'

The influence of absinthe was not exclusive to the French poets either. English poet Ernest Dowson composed an ode to

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to be an essential part of the sensual explorer's tool kit—illustrating the belief that the green spirit could act on the consciousness to produce ideas not otherwise accessible. The reputation is understandable considering that wormwood, a main ingredient of absinthe, is a mild hallucinogen, and could, combined with the sheer strength of the drink, have altered mental states, especially poetic, artistic and creative ones.

Charles Baudelaire, author of *Les Fleurs du Mal* and believer that 'one must always

be drunk', endorsed absinthe as part of his manifesto of decadence—a manifesto that called for writers to be intoxicated in order to truly experience the artistic consciousness. Highly influenced by Baudelaire were the French poets Arthur Rimbaud and Paul Verlaine. Rimbaud, the original *enfant terrible*, had produced his own manifesto, often referred to as *dérèglement*: 'The systematic disordering of all the senses'. It was a philosophy practised to the extreme,

his favourite drink entitled, *Absinthia Taetra*, containing the line: 'The man let the water trickle gently into his glass, and as the green clouded, a mist fell from his mind.' Appreciative of the romantic properties of the spirit, Dowson recognised absinthe as the only choice for the free-thinker: 'Whiskey and beer are for fools! Absinthe has the power of the magicians; it can wipe out or renew the past, and annul or foretell the future.'

A renowned 19th century saying suggested that absinthe could provide



artistic talent just two glasses in: Absinthe gives genius to those who do not have it, and takes it away from those who do.' But is this true? Can absinthe really gift us with artistic talent? With a hall of fame akin to a who's who of art and literature, the case in favour is compelling. But it is worth noting that figures such as Manet, Degas, and Baudelaire, all produced considerable works long before their first sip of *La Fée Verte*. Would-be artists did flock to the Left Bank hoping to produce masterpieces under the influence of absinthe, but consumption of the drink only served to energise talent that already existed.

Of the famous names associated with the drink, none is more intriguing than Vincent van Gogh. Were his bold colours and swirling images a direct result of excess absinthe consumption? Did he slice off his ear, attack Paul Gauguin, and commit suicide because he was under the influence of absinthe? Attributing the power of absinthe to the complexities of van Gogh's psyche is to exaggerate the power of the beverage. It is reasonable to speculate that absinthe had a profound effect on van Gogh's life and work, but it was only one of many factors that led to his most celebrated period. True, he enjoyed absinthe and true, it could have altered his state of mind, but this was a person with a fragile temperament, addicted to a range of substances, even paint thinner. Considering that absinthe could be 75 per cent alcohol by volume, it was unwise for a man such as van Gogh to go near the stuff. The artist's suicide in Auvers-sur-Oise, just yards from the present day musée de l'Absinthe, eternally links absinthe to van Gogh's mental decline. Indeed, soon after his death, absinthe was commonly said to be *un train direct*—a direct train, to the madhouse.

Van Gogh's friend Toulouse-Lautrec, a severe alcoholic, mixed his absinthe with brandy rather than water, and placed a hollow glass tube in his walking stick, filled with the cocktail so he would never be without a glass. As with van Gogh, the effect of absinthe on Toulouse-Lautrec has reached mythic proportions, as though absinthe alone sped the diminutive artist to an early grave. It would not have helped, but neither would the brandy.

The motivation to ban absinthe in France was complex. It would be easy to view the drink with a scathing eye that turns away when other intoxicants are presented—and sadly this occurred. Either way, by the 20th century, absinthe would be the ultimate social scapegoat, blamed for



the cause of all society's ills, with the Church, the wine trade, and a determined press all baying for its end. The wine producers had a special interest in seeing absinthe production halted. As absinthe's popularity boomed, wine production had been punctuated by failures of the grape harvest, leading to inevitable price increases and falling sales. A moral crusade pushed hard for a ban and when early French defeats in World War I were absurdly attributed to absinthe, production was finally made illegal. The ban was not lifted until 1990.

Contrary to assumptions, absinthe was never illegal in Britain. The strange daubings of the impressionists, coupled with the Oscar Wilde trials of 1895, created the belief that absinthe was a poisonous remedy guaranteed to turn one into a devilish sexual degenerate with a landscape of warped minds. Few people drank absinthe in Britain and the demand decreased further as everything connected to Wilde was rejected. Wilde, in fact, was

not so keen on absinthe but often indulged, as he claimed it suited his style so well. He also summed up the effects of the drink as only Wilde could: 'After the first glass you see things as you wish they were. After the second, you see things as they are not. Finally you see things as they really are—and that is the most horrible thing in the world.'

Absinthe's associations with the decadents, and its effect on 19th-century artistic life, have been branded in every sense. Whether accurate or not, the myth of absinthe is immovable; the drink that supposedly killed Oscar Wilde, helped to send van Gogh crazy, and made an indelible impression on the impressionists. The reality of absinthe may never be understood and perhaps, ironically, the myth aids its renaissance. Modern marketing certainly understands the seductive power of drinking a beverage associated with a hedonistic period of history. As one advertising slogan states: 'Tonight we're gonna party like it's 1899'. 