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No diluting absinthe's lure

Banned no more, drink draws pack of eager buyers in U.S.

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ALAMEDA, Calif. – Green is the new black. That would be the pearly green of absinthe, the legendary liquor said to have made Vincent Van Gogh decide that cutting off his ear was an idea whose time had come.

Ernest Hemingway called it "liquid alchemy," Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec allegedly carried a supply in a hollow cane and French poet Paul Verlaine cursed it as his ruin. On Friday, for the first time since 1912, U.S.-made absinthe was sold with hopes that it will become the cult drink of the season.

Hundreds dodged work, stood in a long, madness-inducing line and forked over \$75 for a bottle of absinthe at St. George Spirits, a boutique firm that is launching a campaign to market the liquor.

Karen Juzefczyk, 49, drove for six hours to get to the distillery, observed a preparation ritual involving the careful introduction of two miniature ice cubes, raised a glass in the St. George Spirits tasting room and took her first sip. The experience reduced her vocabulary to one word: "Wow."

The price tag for the 120-proof spirit shouldn't be an obstacle for Chicago households, which spend more money per year on alcohol than any other city surveyed by the U.S. Bureau of Labor statistics. According to the most recent survey, households in Chicago spent \$839 per year on alcohol, compared to New York at \$488 a year and \$757 a year in San Francisco.

If anything, the expensive price is part of the appeal, said David Hanson, professor of sociology emeritus at State University of New York College at Pottsdam and a longtime alcohol researcher. Alcohol consumption is inversely associated with social status, he said. "The lower the social class, the higher the abstention," he said. "Similarly, the more educated people are in the U.S., the more likely they are to drink."

Alleged to have induced feverish creativity in painters such as Edvard Munch, Pablo Picasso and Paul Gauguin, absinthe was banned in France and several other countries for nearly 100 years as opponents



claimed the drink caused widespread debauchery and delinquency. Some say the ban was the result of a campaign by the French wine industry to discredit the popular drink. The health risks have been debunked, said Hanson, the researcher.

European countries have gradually lifted their bans and in March, the federal government finally agreed to allow absinthe to be sold again in the U.S. Three foreign-made absinthes are already on the market and 20 other brands have asked for permission to sell in the U.S., according to Robert Lehrman, a Washington, D.C., lawyer who worked for four years to get the Alcohol and Tobacco Tax and Trade Bureau to lift the ban.

From the start, devotees have claimed that this is a drink like no other. The green spirit produces an intoxication that is coupled with a caffeine-like alertness, according to imbibers. Robert Jordan, a character in the Hemingway novel "For Whom the Bell Tolls," described the drink as "opaque, bitter, tongue-numbing, brain-warming, stomach-warming, idea-changing liquid alchemy" and carried a flask of it.

"You can drink it and still be lucid," said Chuck Kapelke, 33, of Oakland, who was roughly No. 43 in a 300-plus person line Friday waiting for the 11 a.m. opening sales. "It's almost like a mix of Red Bull and vodka."

The flavor is robust. In the St. George Sprits Absinthe Verte, the sensations include the licorice-taste of anise, a whiff of fresh grass, a touch of citrus and a hint of mint, said Lance Winters, a master distiller at St. George Spirits who created the absinthe. "Absinthe represents the pinnacle of the distiller's art," he said. "You end up with distilled poetry in a glass."

As for Van Gogh's trouble with the stuff, Winters said, "My guess is Van Gogh had some issues before going into the bar." He added, "I've consumed quite a bit of absinthe in my studies and I have both my ears intact."

In the distillery's plant in the vast military hangar on a former Navy base, the St. George Spirits team wore T-shirts proclaiming "Green is the new black" and performed the ritual of preparing absinthe. While other absinthes call for dissolving a sugar cube into the spirit, the St. George Spirit Absinthe Verte preparation involved gently releasing two tiny ice cubes into the dense green liquid, which instantly turned cloudy as essential oils emerged from herbs. Many were the hours that 19th Century poets and artists spent studying the clouds in an absinthe glass in Paris cafes.

Among those imbibing here were Kevin Roche, 47, a research scientist, who is so avid in his devotion to St. George Spirits that he designed a military-style gray uniform with a St. George Spirits Tactical Alcohol Consumption Squad insignia. He and two other squad members were on hand in full regalia. "We're so serious about our drinking we have uniforms for it," said Roche.

Dr. H. Westley Clark, director of the federal Center for Substance Abuse Treatment, said the introduction of high-alcohol absinthe called for "caveat emptor," let the buyer beware. "You worry about college students," said Clark, who questioned whether some will choose to drink absinthe undiluted. "There are a lot of people who test the edge of the universe."

In the cold Friday, the line snaked through the parking lot and out the gate. One would-be patron read a thriller, another a newspaper, while Brezi Little, 29, bounced her 5-month-old daughter, Emma, in her carrier. Little was on a mission to get a bottle of absinthe as a surprise gift for her husband and, as the carrier of the youngest person in line, was the subject of much ribbing. The absinthe was "just in time for teething," said Little, who noted that a tooth was pushing through Emma's lower left gum.

First in line was Joanne Clapp Fullagar of Alameda, a production editor, who had queued up at 8:30 a.m. "I'm technically working at home," she said. "My boss called and I'm going to buy her a bottle."

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