

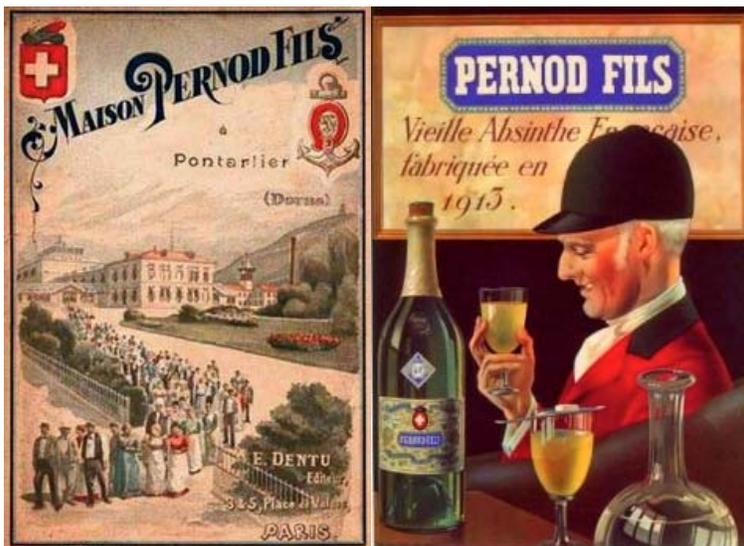
NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

Absinthe Minded

In the last decade of the eighteenth century, Dr. Pierre Ordinaire, a Frenchman living in Switzerland, created a digestive tonic containing medicinal herbs such as *artemisia absinthium* (wormwood), anise and melissa. *Absinthium* is Latin-French for wormwood (via the original Greek *apsinthion*, meaning undrinkable), hence the name absinthe (vermouth also comes from the French form of the German *wermut*, meaning wormwood). Even more incredible is that wormwood in Russian is *chernobyl*, a name made famous by nuclear meltdown. A business deal brought Ordinaire's recipe into the hands of Major Dubied and his son-in-law, Henri-Louis Pernod, who opened the first absinthe distillery in Couvet, Switzerland, in 1797. In 1805, *Maison Pernod Fils* was established in Pontarlier, France. By 1888, additional financing came from Arthur Veil-Picard, an important banker from Besançon, France. The *Pernod Fils* brand name was retained, but the business name became *Société Veil-Picard & Compagnie*.



Pernod Fils Posters through the years

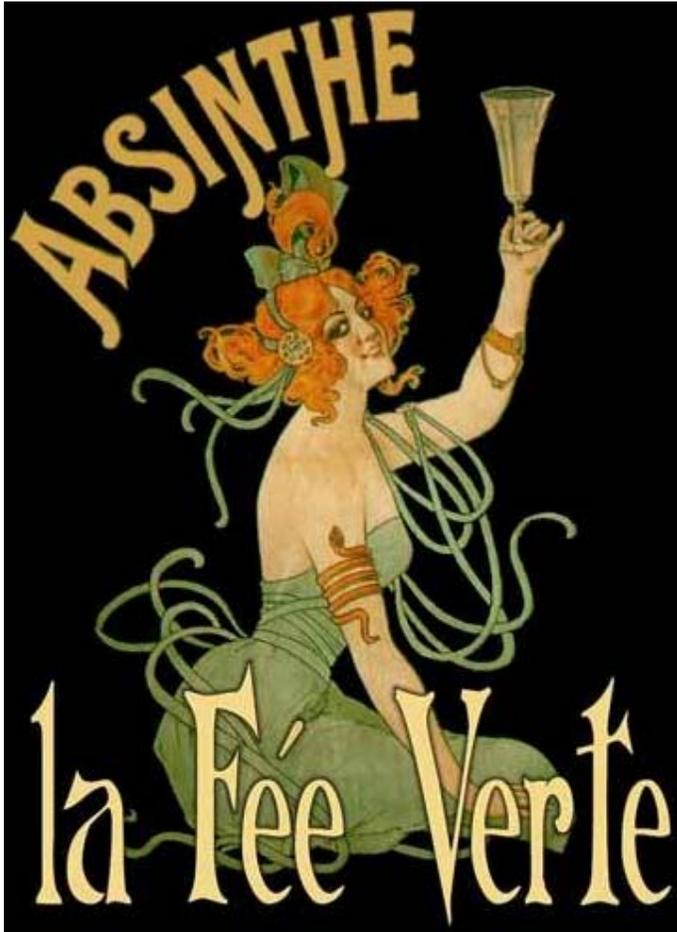
In 1871, Ariste Hémard, of Eure-et-Loir, France, founded *Distillerie Hémard* with the purchase of a distillery and the creation of a liqueur factory near Paris. By 1900, the enterprise produced various liqueurs, absinthes, spirits, syrups and preserved fruits. *La Maison Hémard* earned a gold medal at the *Exposition Universelle* (1900 World's Fair in Paris) for its pale absinthe, and Hémard was chosen Mayor of Montreuil that same year. In 1915, a French national ban on absinthe crippled *Pernod Fils* and in 1917 Veil-Picard sold the plant at Pontarlier to Nestlé (after more than 110 years of operation). Determined to keep the brand alive, the Veil-Picard family met with André Hémard, who had been successful in converting his company in Montreuil-sous-Bois to the production of an anise-flavored drink from herbal wines called *Amourette*. In July 1926, Hémard's company merged with *Pernod Fils* to form a new company, *Maison A. Hémard et Pernod Fils Réunies*, and a new product. Seven years later, the company had ten factories in France and more than fifteen hundred employees.



Hémard and Pernod Fils join forces

In France before the ban, absinthe had become known as *la Fée Verte* (the Green Fairy), and its consumption increased throughout the nineteenth century. Army doctors had prescribed absinthe for French soldiers in North Africa. Returning home in 1847, they spread its use until it became an essential fixture of life in bohemian Paris. By the

mid-nineteenth century, the *Pernod Fils* distilleries were producing some 20,000 liters a day. Artists and writers of *fin-de-siècle* Paris became pixilated by the green elixir and extolled its benefits. Toulouse-Lautrec (while prowling the *Moulin Rouge*), Degas, Van Gogh, Gauguin, Arthur Rimbaud, Paul Mariè Verlaine and many of their associates imbibed the popular drink throughout *la Belle Époque*. The time of day that these Parisian visionaries summoned their green muse was known as *l'heure verte*.



Absinthe, la Fée Verte

In London absinthe became fashionable not only among artistic and literary types, but also among intellectuals and the upper class. Oscar Wilde was an avid exponent of the beverage, who expounded: "A glass of absinthe is as poetical as anything in the world. What difference is there between a glass of absinthe and a sunset?"

Oscar Wilde lectured on "household beauty" at the casino at Spanish Fort when he visited New Orleans as part of his 1882 Aesthetics Tour throughout the United States. The English aesthetic movement had been shocking the Victorian middle class by contending that a work of literature need not be a sermon serving some higher spiritual purpose. Absinthe had preceded Wilde to the "Little Paris of America" and appeared as early as 1837 in New Orleans liquor advertisements. Its

popularity in the Crescent City really took off after 1869 when the Aleix Brothers hired bartender Cayetano Ferrer from the French Opera House for their establishment on the corner of Bourbon and Bienville (built 1806). In 1874 (the year France consumed 700,000 liters of absinthe) Ferrer leased the building and renamed it the Absinthe Room, but today it is known around the world as the Old Absinthe House. And New Orleans became known as the absinthe capital of North America.



The Old Absinthe House served absinthe to its customers in the French style: The bitterness of the absinthe was diluted by spigots on a green marble fountain dripping cold water over a sugar cube placed in a special slotted spoon. This entered the liquor creating a dazzling milky-green opalescence known as the *louche*. The fountain was crowned with the figure of Napoléon, who presided over this ritual drizzle. Cocktails made with absinthe or absinthe substitutes include the absinthe frappé, the Sazerac (favorite of Presidents Taft and Harding) and the absinthe Suisse.



Old Absinthe House in New Orleans, old postcard view

Hemingway drank a "Death in the Afternoon Cocktail", made with absinthe and champagne. He wrote about absinthe, as well, in "For Whom the Bell Tolls":

"One cup of (Absinthe) took the place of the evening papers, of all the old evenings in cafés of all the things he had enjoyed and forgotten and that came back to him when he tasted that opaque, bitter, tongue-numbing, brain-warming, stomach-warming, idea-changing liquid alchemy."

Celebrities like Mark Twain, Walt Whitman, Theodore Roosevelt, Jenny Lind and Aleister Crowley were visitors to the Old Absinthe House with its long cypress bar. There many of them sipped the renowned swirling green liquid. Crowley was a British occultist known as the "wickedest man in the world". He also wrote of the aesthetics of absinthe in 1918 in an essay entitled "Absinthe: The Green Goddess" which he penned in New Orleans. In it he proclaimed that "Art is the soul of life, and the Old Absinthe House is the heart and soul of the old quarter of New Orleans." Famous New Orleans chef and food product developer, Warren LeRuth would later create his own version of the famous "Green Goddess" salad dressing.



*Absinthe spoon leaning against a reservoir glass containing a naturally green colored absinthe
Photograph by Eric Litton*

Local brands of absinthe had intriguing names like “Milky Way” and “Green Opal.” J. Marion Legendre (born in New Orleans in 1897 and cousin of New Orleans native Anne Legendre Armstrong, U. S. Ambassador to Great Britain, 1976-1977) learned how to make absinthe while in France during World War I. Legendre’s “Herbsaint” went on sale after the repeal of Prohibition as an absinthe substitute, as opposed to a *pastis* (an anise-flavored liqueur and apéritif with a lower alcohol content). Containing no wormwood, it is produced locally by the Sazerac Company. Absinthe originally flavored Antoine’s signature creation, Oysters Rockefeller, but on July 25, 1912, the U. S. placed a ban on absinthe. The Sazerac Company, privately held with headquarters in Metairie, Louisiana, the largest distilling company in the United States, bought J. M. Legendre & Co. in June 1949.



Bans on absinthe production, both in the U. S. and abroad came about after two horrifying Swiss murders where absinthe was involved. A temperance movement before World War I and some flawed tests made with highly concentrated wormwood pushed the popular drink's ban across much of Europe. By 1910, France was consuming 36 million liters a year. With so many imbibing, it was easy to find ample evidence of its ill effects (yet absinthe never made up more than three percent of the alcohol consumed in France). The Swiss ban was enacted in 1908 and France followed seven years later.

The seductive qualities of the dazzling green potent potable also hastened its demise. Francis Ford Coppola, who owns a "villa" not far from the Old Absinthe House, used absinthe in his film "Bram Stoker's Dracula". In it Dracula (Gary Oldman) seduces Mina (Winona Ryder) in a café when he tells her, "Absinthe is the aphrodisiac of the self. The Green Fairy who lives in the absinthe wants your soul. But you are safe with me." After that she is under the vampire's spell, giving credence to the belief that absinthe makes the heart grow fonder. Then there's the moral and physical decline exhibited by absinthe addiction in "Madame X". The stage play in 1910 was followed by three Broadway revivals and nine film versions (way more remakes than "Beau Geste"). Most remember the 1966 Lana Turner version.

In 1975 *Société Paul Ricard* merged with old rival *Pernod* to form what is today *Groupe Pernod Ricard*, one of the largest purveyors of wines and spirits in the world. In 2006, when this article first appeared, Patrick Ricard was Chairman and Françoise Hémard was a director. Brands included *Pernod*, *Ricard*, Wild Turkey, Chivas Regal, Mumm's and *Perrier-Jouët* Champagnes, Kahlúa, Jameson Irish Whiskey (once owned by Guglielmo Marconi's mother's family – she was a Jameson) and Beefeater Gin, to name but a few. In 2015, Alexandre Ricard is Chairman and CEO, and Absolut Vodka is a "global icon" among its brands. version.



For the last several years there is a movement to bring back the original absinthe, many believing that the erotic elixir got a bum rap through the years. *La Fée Absinthe*, in 2000, became the first commercial absinthe distilled and bottled in France since the 1815 ban. Actor Johnny Depp has been a present-day connoisseur of absinthe, but knows well its reputation. New Orleans chemist Ted Breaux has explained that *thujone*, the chemical in wormwood deemed harmful through the years, is "not present in any absinthe in sufficient concentration to cause any type of deleterious effects in humans." His company, Jade Liqueurs, Ltd., has set up operations in Saumur, France, with the production of three varieties (using authentic *Pernod Fils* copper stills over a century old). These include "*Absinthe Nouvelle-Orléans*", with the label caption "*La Fée du Vieux Carré*" (which appears to have been changed to "*L'Esprit du Vieux Carré*"). The three absinthes contain wormwood and have an alcoholic content ranging from 65 to 72 per cent. Jade Liqueurs even offer a unique Perique Tobacco Liqueur. In England the retailing of these authentic absinthes is legal, and they are featured in exclusive stores like Fortnum and Mason.

In 2007, the "Lucid" brand became the first genuine absinthe in France to receive approval for importation into the United States since 1912. In May 2011, petitions by the *Fédération Française des Spiritueux* (representing French distillers) successfully resulted in the repeal of the French Absinthe Ban of 1815.



Lucid Absinthe and author, poet, and playwright Oscar Wilde

Oscar Wilde also wrote these words about absinthe: "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." The debate over absinthe versus its substitutes continues, while an excellent Sazerac can still be enjoyed in fine New Orleans establishments.

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