

taste



A DEPICTION OF absinthe imbibers in the 1880s: lore has it that the 'green fairy' drink drove Van Gogh to lop off an ear

This B.C. absinthe is the real thing

But the only 'maddening' thing about it is the bureaucracy governing Canada's liquor trade

BY NICHOLAS KÖHLER • Absinthe, the anise-based drink of *la belle époque*, is today so riddled with mystique that it's almost grown a little nerdy—something a sommelier might recommend to accompany a long session of Dungeons and Dragons, say. The ritual of the long-banned drink, either set aflame or sweetened using a sugar cube and a dagger-shaped spoon that looks like what Marilyn Manson uses to eat his Cheerios, is already passé little more than a decade after resurfacing in Czech and other European iterations. In each of the last two years, Canadians bought fewer than 3,000 cases, according to industry numbers—more than a hiccup but less than a niche.

All of which may be why Frank Deiter, a German expat whose Vernon, B.C., distillery may be the first in North America to produce "real" absinthe—his recipe includes wormwood, the controversial herb said to cause hallucinations—likes to deflate the prevailing mythology somewhat. Is absinthe really the "green fairy" of lore, the stuff that drove Van Gogh to lop off an ear? Well, not quite. "If you drink a lot of it, you get pretty hammered," Deiter, 58, concedes in his no-nonsense Prussian diction. "If you consider that hallucinating, just drink a bottle of vodka." There are better reasons to drink absinthe—the complex aromas of anise, hyssop, fennel and bitter wormwood that, he says, make it a "superb summer drink. I wish I could tell you it's all this hocus-pocus. But it isn't."

So much for its taboo allure, then. In fact, much of its mystique is humbug. The burning sugar, far from traditional, goes back only to the 1990s and is a Czech innovation. High quality absinthes like Deiter's need no sugar, used in bohemian Paris to camouflage the

harsher notes of badly distilled varieties. Water, however, encourages its hidden flavours to blossom, clouding the glass with a milky *louche* that is the mark of real absinthe. Wormwood, also a must for authentic absinthe and whose thujone component was once thought similar to THC, is now known to be benign. "It's similar to the mescal myth—that it has hallucinogenic compounds," says Mark Shipway, head of wine at Vancouver's International Culinary School. "It doesn't. It just has a lot of impurities and nasty alcohols that definitely will make you a bit crazy."

None of this stopped Deiter from calling his product, which went on sale in B.C. and Alberta late last month, Absinthe-Taboo. Yet, as he's discovered since founding his distillery, Okanagan Spirits, four years ago, the most maddening thing about his alcohols has less to do with wormwood and more with the bureaucracy governing Canada's liquor trade. Five years ago, Deiter, who had just finished 30 years in forestry, was strolling through an apple orchard in the Okanagan when he noticed the ground littered with fruit, produce that hadn't made it to market due to size or blemishes. A fan of eaux-de-vie—fiery fruit brandies not widely available in Canada—Deiter knew that in Europe such refuse fruit would be collected and mashed for distillation.

It was an epiphany. A year later, after apprenticing at European stills, Deiter's became the first micro-distillery in B.C. Within months he'd entered three of his hand-crafted, all-natural eaux-de-vie in the World Spirits Championship in Austria, where they competed against some of the best in Europe. Deiter brought home three medals—two silvers and a gold. It was an astonishing victory for a neophyte. Since then, the medals have swelled to 22—10 of them gold—and his products now include world-class grappas, an aquavit, and Taboo, which earlier this year won a silver medal, also in Austria.

A success story, right? Well, consider this: only a handful of his products are available at Canadian liquor stores—none east of Alberta. Even in B.C., home to the orchards that grow his pears, cherries, apples and raspberries, Deiter fought for two years to get his spirits listed. "They said, 'No, we're not interested—we get our grappa from Italy,'" he says. The Liquor Control Board of Ontario three times rejected similar entreaties. And Deiter, who uses artesian well water, a wood-fired still and must mash many pounds of fruit for a single bottle of eau-de-vie, pays the same taxes and markups as the largest industrial manufacturers. "We are still not cash stable," he says. That could change with Taboo, whose cachet may force open the doors of the provincial liquor bodies and beyond—a Trojan Horse to his real passion for distilling the very essence of Okanagan fruit into high-grade grog. **M**



TODAY'S SPECIAL...PRE-MELTED CHOCOLATE BARS

For those who find melting chocolate in their mouths simply too much hard work, the makers of the Lava Bar can help. The 70-g chocolate bar comes in a foil-lined pouch and is "pre-melted." All users have to do is tear open the pouch and sluice down chocolatey goodness. The manufacturers say that although it's not a syrup (it has the consistency of ganache), Lava Bars can be squeezed over ice cream and onto fruit.