

Sample Feature Article

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PART ONE

If there's one thing I need from my dens of ill repute, it's a lack of piano music and lakefront views.

Clearly the place I picked was going to disappoint.

After a full week and a half of intensive search, I had ended up at the Lakewood restaurant Pier W. I knew we weren't getting out of here without blowing at least \$30. And because of the way I had made my reservation, the staff knew that I was going to try something that just three years ago was illegal.

But the staff was giddy. They knew more about the thing's history than I may ever know about dangling participles. They explained how to process the substance into a non-lethal form as they brought out multiple glasses and complex contraptions to aid me.

On a Thursday night there weren't many other customers in the dining room. But as elegant hardware started piling up, the nearest table leaned over and started to ask questions.

Why was I hanging out at one of Cleveland's premiere high-end restaurants on a school night? And at an hour when I should be sacked out on my couch watching a good rerun of Dethclok?

It all started with one, decidedly odd, question.

Where in Northeast Ohio can you buy a glass of absinthe?

I don't know if I would ever have asked that question if I hadn't been writing a short history of absinthe for a client. But once I asked the question, I found I couldn't answer it.

If you want to buy a glass of gin, brandy, whiskey or general hooch you can go almost anywhere. In my hometown of Kent alone, there are 33 bars. Everyone from college kids to tired businessmen use them daily to unwind and enjoy a tasty beverage.

But even after it was legalized, I had never seen an absinthe spoon resting on a bar. I'd never seen a milky green glass perched on the same table as a Long Island Iced Tea.

I had never had a single sip of Absinthe, but I had been curious about it. So I decided to see if I could sample some.

My curiosity shrank considerably when I learned full bottles of the liquor started at \$75.

As someone who takes her recession-stretched budget very seriously, I winced and kept looking. There had to be someplace in the area where someone could *try* absinthe.

Further research proved that there was... provided you planned months in advance.

It seems to have become fashionable in certain local circles to have an absinthe 'event'. Spirit Apothecary's "Absinthe Speakeasy", which pops up twice a year, seems to be the gold standard. It's an event designed to bring together people who know where good absinthe is and how to get it. And Spirit Apothecary also provides the materials for those brave souls who want to brew it themselves.

On the other end of the spectrum is the Cleveland Museum of Art. It included an absinthe tasting as part of the opening of their new Gauguin exhibit. It was done on the day before Halloween, and it was quickly pointed out that the exhibit could be seen with more typical beverages later that week.

I was handicapped further by the season. Serving absinthe tends to be an autumnal event in Ohio. The drink's reputation of death and madness is a natural complement to the Halloween season. Like eggnog, but without having to deal with your relatives.

And while this new information was interesting, it didn't help matters. I wanted to try a glass of absinthe when the moment struck me, not months later during something that would require me to get dressed up and make awkward small talk.

Why was it so hard to just go get a glass of this stuff?

I began to see the lingering traces of absinthe's bad reputation when I stopped searching online and started asking people. I thought one person in my zany, pleasantly weird circle of friends would be able to give me a recommendation. No such luck. You'd think I was going up to my drugstore's tobacco counter and asking the clerk for a dime bag of weed.

Taleisin, my co-writer on TV show 'Quarter Bin', had some typical words of wisdom. "It's easy to find someone who knows someone who has a bottle. But shots of it? Good luck."

"Are you guys talking about absinthe?" Keith, the show's director asked, "That stuff tastes like shit."

"Exactly," Taleisin agreed.

Naturally, I knew the drink wasn't going to be for everyone. I didn't even know if I'd be able to get it down. Besides a strong brandy that acts as the base, the main ingredient in absinthe is wormwood. And wormwood is a multi-faceted medicinal plant that has been called the bitterest herb on the planet. Earlier versions of the drink were so bitter they had to be doctored – hence the iconic image of a sugar cube sitting in a slotted spoon over the mouth of an absinthe glass.

But the wormwood wasn't the thing that people were complaining about. Friends on Facebook stated I was wasting my time as the absinthe we have in the US isn't 'real' absinthe. And there is a reason why the US suddenly allowed absinthe to be legal again after nearly 100 years of demonization.

Scientific tests were done on the drink and it was determined that the chemical Thujone was the only substance in absinthe that could be considered remotely harmful. And - even then - only in large quantities.

In an era of homemade meth labs, the risk posed by Thujone seemed pretty ridiculous. So the US government required manufacturers tone down the levels of Thujone, and took the ban off the books. So today, if you want to get a glass of absinthe that had the same levels of Thujone that inspired Mark Twain, Oscar Wilde, Vincent van Gogh, Henri le Toulouse-Lautrec, Pablo Picasso, and Ernest Hemingway, you'll have to go to Europe. European countries like Ireland and the Czech Republic had never outright banned the substance - even at the height of the absinthe hysteria. And back in the 90's some intelligent entrepreneurs realized there was no actual law against making it. After that, the inevitable comeback came quickly.

All this was interesting information, but it was getting me nowhere. I was starting to get frustrated. It wasn't just the assumptions about state laws, the undercurrent of snobbery, and an assumption that what buzz I'd get wasn't worth it. It was the feeling that once again there was some great cultural happening that no one in Ohio wanted to participate in. I had gotten so frustrated that I had even gone back online, trying desperately for some answers.

It was then that I found an old 'Cleveland.com' article that pointed me in the right direction.

It was a bemused and slightly voyeuristic look at the drink when it had first attained legality. Local experts demystified some of the harsher myths and recommended brands. The whole

piece gave off more of a hipster vibe than anything else, but it managed to get across some real facts.

And it mentioned a restaurant name.

And when I saw Pier W's website displaying a promotional link titled 'Absinthe Makes the Heart Grow Fonder' I knew I finally had a winner.

NEXT TIME: I miss the chance to yell 'road trip', we'll see what type of bisque goes with wormwood, and why the Green Fairy has already lost your number...

PART TWO

Tracking down the one place in Ohio where you can get a glass of Absinthe on a random weeknight taught me a valuable lesson in recession economics.

Being a cheap drunk, I knew having a designated driver was the only way I was making it back from Cleveland in one piece. I needed a Sancho Panza for this irreverent little mission. Or - at the very least - a relatively sober Dr. Gonzo.

In flusher times, if I had called anyone on my small list of close-knit friends and told them we were going on an Absinthe Road Trip, I would have gotten takers. Maybe not a car load, but I could have managed to find someone to go with me.

This time around? People had 'obligations'.

Part-time seasonal work, schoolwork, bowling leagues... people who, few months ago, would call me up when they were bored out of their gourds, couldn't spare a few measly hours.

So I ended up doing what I normally do in these situations.

I ended up going with my father.

My family is close, perhaps weirdly so. In college my sister-drunk dialed us instead of her ex boyfriends, talking about how she missed spending time with us. My mother and father,

despite being divorced for a number of years, have a better relationship than most married couples I know.

And my father has chaperoned me to all sorts of events – networking, surprise birthday parties, wakes, and Cinematic Titanic viewings – well into my twenties. Of course, that's more due to the fact that he knows what can happen when I'm on an 'adventure' unsupervised. But all I had to do was mention what I had planned, and his schedule suddenly cleared.

The only objection he voiced came just before we left, as he turned to me and said, "You know this is crazy, right?"

I turned to him with a smile. "Yup. Let's go."

And we did.

Dad drove. I navigated using my GPS. And anyone who has read one of my features before, knows that last sentence never results in anything good.

We followed the GPS's directions onto an off ramp we didn't need to take. Then we added 20 minutes to the trip by following the new, recalculated directions. The GPS said it would be a shorter distance. That shorter distance ran through a block of streets rough enough that Dad suddenly remembered why he rarely goes up into Cleveland.

But in time we were weaving through the quaintly ginger breaded brownstones and apartment complexes of Lakewood. Pier W is positioned on the lake in a savagely hip district of that city. The décor is elegant, yet modern. There's a focus on fish and sea life, with the stairs down to the dining room wrapping around a large glass aquarium. In the evenings it's tastefully candlelit and populated by polished and sophisticated diners. One full wall of the restaurant is plate glass, showcasing a spectacular view of the Cleveland skyline.

Mentioning our reservation, the staff smiled like benign used car salesmen, and seated us. Eight sets of absinthe glasses, an absinthe water fountain, and a selection of absinthe spoons were set out. We confessed to our attentive waiter that this was our first time out, more to find out why the heck they were seating for eight when I made the reservation for two.

When we learned the full service is standard for these tastings, we asked what 'standard' usually looked like. Pier W's standard absinthe tasting usually features two or three people, with the largest party they've ever hosted at 8 guests. And typically there's at least one absinthe tasting each weeknight. A tasting is not done at any set time in the day. The interested parties are the ones who schedule when their absinthe tasting will take place.

The manager - a man so sophisticated, knowledgeable and charming that I'm deeply embarrassed I never wrote down his name - came out to walk us through the process. He wanted us to taste as many of half-dozen absinthe brands as we could. He said he knew from

experience that no matter how many we enjoyed, we would inevitably find one that we hated. But part of the fun of the tasting was discovering why we did like our favorites.

Dad questioned just how strong the stuff really was. Splashing a minuscule amount into the set of glasses shaped like tiny champagne bowls, the manager invited us to try.

We sipped.

For the record you should never do shots of absinthe. Firstly, absinthe is all about the flavor. Secondly, we're talking about liquor that starts at 100 proof. And straight up it can be more than a little overwhelming.

It was so strong that I started coughing. Dad just blinked.

"You know," I told him, "That's actually really nice."

Processed it was better.

We were instructed on how to use the intricate drip fountain to infuse – or louche -the drink. For the absinthe innocents in the audience, there are three main pieces of hardware you need to enjoy it to the best of its ability: a slotted spoon, an absintheglass, and cold water.

Fill the absinthe glass up until the absinthe mark, usually a bubble or line marking off 1/3 of the total volume. Next, position the slotted spoon over the mouth of the glass with a single sugar cube in its center. Then, slowly, drip ice water over the cube until the glass is around 2/3rds full.

You may need to play around with the proportions according to your taste, but that's part of the fun. When done correctly the drink will -almost magically - turn from a clear greenish-brown to a milky light green.

Louched, our drinks were lighter, brighter, and slightly sweeter. But again, sipping not slamming is the name of the game here.

The texture of the brandy base may make the word 'smooth' tumble out of your mouth. But smooth – as Saint George's Distiller's Lance Winter mentioned in his video FAQ - is an asshole's cop-out. The texture is only part of the story.

There's the strength of the alcohol, the black jellybean flavor of the anise, the bitter undercurrent of the wormwood. The sugar you've infused may almost taste as suspended as two sugar cubes bobbing in a cup of particularly bitter black tea.

But after the three main flavors make their introductions, there's a whole list of other flavors that start popping up. Each sip of absinthe is slightly different from the rest. It changes on you, dancing between primal darkness and light sophistication.

While the lighter flavors were as green as a freshly picked lettuce leaf, I would never compare the overall taste to that of a green fae succubus.

Overall, it's an odd flavor, decidedly awkward. More like a surly teenager - one you've known since their childhood. The sweetness of youth is still apparent, but the complexity and bitterness of maturation stands out every time.

To some that teen might seem somewhat charming. To others that teen might seem like something not worth wasting time on. Whether or not you enjoy either experience is all down to a matter of personal preference. And bear in mind that even if you can afford a bottle, absinthe is something you should try first in a measure of glasses rather than liters.

I asked Dad what he thought.

"This would be perfect on a cold night." He nodded thoughtfully as he pushed the rest of his barely-touched glass over to me, "Not half bad."

I snagged the glass he was offering and started sipping. Hell, I wasn't driving.

I might as well answer the next question you're thinking. No. There were no green fairies dancing around my head. There were no LSD-like trips.

Neither I nor Dad wore sunglasses, chomping on a cigarette holder, declaring this was bat country.

The only unusual affect was a sense of clear-headedness that I've never felt drinking any other type of spirit. It was something I'd heard about in my research – that the infused herbal elements combated the confusion of intoxication without losing the warm, fuzzy sensation that went with a good stiff drink.

"But aren't you just feeling the way you think you should be feeling?" Dad questioned, when I described the sensation, "Would you feel the same way if you hadn't read about it?"

"There's always a chance it's a placebo." I reasoned, clear-headed, "But I don't think that's it."

As we ordered appetizers – our waiter recommended the lobster bisque – we asked if any of their serious absinthe drinkers had had any major side effects. Did she think there was any truth to the legend of the green fairy?

For the record, she'd never seen anything like the old legends of madness. But did she believe that if you drank enough absinthe something interesting was bound to happen to your perception of reality? Absolutely.

I can see why this was a drink of artists and thinkers. As we drove home, I was slightly buzzed and Dad having had a more pleasantly mundane night than he'd planned. And a funny thing started to happen. We actually started talking. Dad and I talk on a regular basis, but our talks usually stay in the realm of family, work and life's incidentals. We started talking about the future of race in America and the complexities of the human psyche. Even if it were generated by a sophisticated placebo, it was worth it to have an opportunity to have a insightful conversation with my father

Was I pissed that it took me a week and a half's research to get one drink? Hell yes.

But when it comes to first times out, my experience with Pier W was one of the best. There's nothing like a professional who knows and loves whatever you're trying to research. They can give you instructions, walk you through questions even you think are dumb, and help you make connections that would have never crossed your mind . I would have never known Mata Hari absinthe went so well with Lobster bisque and a good clam chowder if not for our waiter.

Absinthe isn't anything to be demonized, ashamed or even snickered at. And if you're interested what the fuss is all about, I suggest you make a reservation at Pier W soon.