

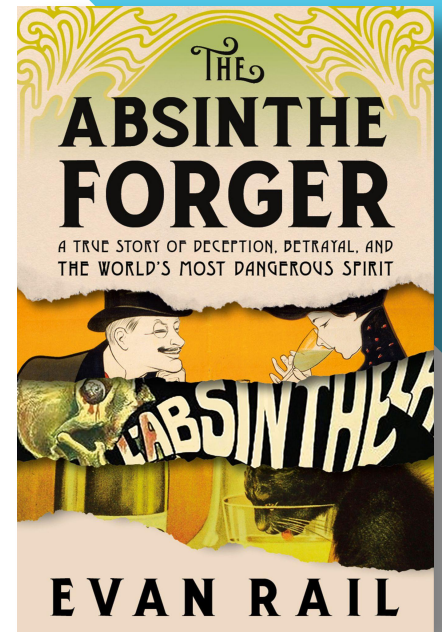
THE ABSINTHE FORGER

A True Story of Deception, Betrayal, and the World's Most Dangerous Spirit

Evan Rail

Hardcover 9781685891541

eBook 9781685891558



“*The Absinthe Forger* is the bracing true story of a much-maligned spirit and the counterfeiter who turned its mythic status to his own ends.”
— **Foreword Reviews, starred review**

“The cultural history of absinthe, via an audacious contemporary fraud. . . . An entertaining survey of spirits culture past and present.” — **Kirkus**

“Aficionados of pastis, ouzo, modern absinthe, and other such libations will learn a lot here about the ancestral archetype of contemporary anise-flavored drinks.” — **Booklist**

NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

In just a couple of decades, absinthe went from completely underground — and almost universally illegal — to a widely beloved legal spirit, once again. I was sipping the drink when it was still banned in most countries, including the U.S. and France, and I watched the culture of absinthe blossom when those bans were repealed. When I heard about the mysterious counterfeiter who forged priceless bottles of historic absinthe from a hundred years ago, I became obsessed by his story, spending a couple of years trying to figure out who he was and how he pulled it off. Along the way, I visited absintheurs across Europe, learning how a small group of amateur detectives uncovered the absinthe forger’s crimes.

Absinthe is suffused with romance — it was the drink of great French poets and painters, after all, and the modern absinthe underground is full of strange secrets. I wrote *The Absinthe Forger* to share this mysterious world — and the story of this wonderful spirit — with readers.

— **Evan Rail**

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Distilled spirits like absinthe are generally thought to have trouble expressing a sense of terroir or regionality. However, absinthe has clear connections to Switzerland’s Val-de-Travers and the nearby French city of Pontarlier. In what ways does absinthe appear to express a sense of place? Can you think of other spirits that are connected to specific locations?
2. Absinthe was a huge part of French culture in the late nineteenth century, though it seems to have been largely left out of the literature of the time. Why do you think absinthe was a popular subject for contemporary paintings, though only rarely depicted in poems, plays, and novels?
3. At the height of absinthe’s popularity, “absinthism” was considered to be a distinct illness from alcoholism. What groups might have directly benefited from the demonization of absinthe? How was the crusade against absinthe used by people who wouldn’t directly benefit from a ban on the spirit?

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4. The author writes that his journalistic career often profiles “distillers, brewers, winemakers, or chefs: creative types who want to talk about their achievements and what they’ve created.” How does the absinthe forger himself fit into that category? How is he different?
5. One absinthe producer says that modern absinthe fans don’t like much variation from traditional recipes. Another says that absinthe doesn’t have very strict rules. How has modern absinthe changed from its origins, and how is it similar?
6. There have been scores of movies about the Prohibition Era and bootleggers in the U.S., but as one Swiss distiller points out, there has never been a single movie or TV show about the clandestine distillers and bootleggers of the Val-de-Travers. Why do you think that is?
7. Although the chemical compound thujone in absinthe is a known neurotoxin, it is very unlikely for someone to get thujone poisoning by drinking absinthe. Why do you think absinthe is still thought of as possibly more harmful than other forms of alcohol?
8. Collectors of pre-ban absinthe often say that it tastes much better than modern absinthe. However, modern reproductions of historic absinthes are said to be getting very close to the pre-ban originals, sometimes tasting like they have already been aged for a century or more. Why do you think pre-bans continue to appeal to collectors? What do you imagine the market pre-ban absinthe will be like in twenty or thirty years?
9. When the absinthe frauds are discovered, collectors are reminded of two infamous counterfeiters from the world of wine: Rudy Kurniawan and Hardy Rodenstock. What characteristics does the absinthe forger share with the two wine counterfeiters? How is he different?
10. In addition to visual evidence of fraudulent absinthe bottles, the amateur absinthe detectives get scientific confirmation by running samples through gas chromatography. Which type of evidence seemed most convincing to you?
11. Why is it difficult for the victims to seek legal redress for the fraudulent bottles they purchased? Is there any justice for them in the end?



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Evan Rail writes about food, drink, and travel for the *New York Times*, the *Wall Street Journal*, *Condé Nast Traveler*, *Saveur*, and others. His monthly “Free Pour” column at the popular site VinePair has been nominated for the International Association of Culinary Professionals Awards. Rail has appeared on numerous television programs, most notably showing Anthony Bourdain around the world of Czech food and drink on the television show “No Reservations.”

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