



# Absinthe Makes a Comeback

• BY CAMERON DODD •

**A**s the list of innovative beers, wines and spirits pouring out of Frederick beverage companies continues to grow, one local distillery has taken on a historic liqueur steeped in myth.

Tenth Ward Distilling Company is continuing its experimental take on traditional spirits with a newly released absinthe.

“Our mission or our brand is to really revive historical craft spirits but give them a conventional twist,” Tenth Ward owner Monica Pearce said. “With absinthe, not only did I want to revive a very old traditional spirit, but there is a huge demand for it in the market now.”

When Tenth Ward hired distiller John Wilcox earlier this year, he brought years of absinthe-making knowledge with him. Wilcox previously worked with South Carolina’s Dark Corner Distillery to release that state’s first commercial absinthe in 2012.

Wilcox said he’s now excited to be working on what is likely Maryland’s first absinthe.

“I’ve heard that some people are toying with it, but no one is selling absinthe,” Wilcox said. “It’s a super niche thing, but it’s growing in popularity as people become more knowledgeable about it, as people forget the kissing siblings scene in [the movie] ‘EuroTrip.’”

Few beverages are as mired in myth as absinthe. As its popularity in 19th-century Europe

**“Got tight last night on absinthe and did knife tricks. Great success shooting the knife underhand into the piano.”**

—Absinthe fan Ernest Hemingway in letter to a friend in 1931

spread, it became associated with subversive elements of society. People suspected the bright-green liqueur caused hallucinations, crazed behavior and even acts of violence.

Absinthe never deserved that reputation, Wilcox said. Wormwood, a key ingredient, could only cause hallucinations if you injected so much it killed you.

“For you to have any kind of hallucinatory experience, you would be dead from alcohol poisoning before you had enough in your system to hallucinate,” Wilcox said.

How much wormwood an absinthe producer can put in their product is limited by law, according to Pearce.

“But even if you tried to make an absinthe that would make you trip, it wouldn’t even be drinkable,” she said. “It’s not really something you have to worry about.”

As for the violent behavior, that came from

bad press and fake science promoted by a jealous wine industry aiming to quell absinthe’s popularity, Wilcox said.

“Absinthe doesn’t make you trip. It doesn’t make you hallucinate. It doesn’t make you do things that you wouldn’t already do when you were sober,” he said.

Tenth Ward’s absinthe recipe comes from very traditional roots. Wilcox based it on techniques published in the 1871 book “A Treatise on the Manufacture and Distillation of Alcoholic Liquors” by Pierre Duplais. Grand wormwood, fennel and anise seed give absinthe its sweet, liquorice-like flavor. Lemon balm and roman wormwood give it the recognizable green hue. The ingredients are slowly distilled with low heat.

Tenth Ward produced several varieties in small batches and let the public help decide which variety to release commercially. At a series of tastings in April, enthusiasts and first-time absinthe drinkers tested traditional and more experimental flavors.

The absinthe Tenth Ward released this summer is based on the tasters’ favorite: A standard absinthe flavored with chamomile and eau de vie, in this case a white apple brandy distilled from McCutcheon’s cider.

“People had a wonderful time. They love the opportunity to do something like this, to give us feedback and taste everything,” Pearce said. “You can tell who are the traditionalists and who liked the weirder stuff.”

CHRIS SANDS