



THE GREEN MUSE

Two Czech distilleries have found themselves a global niche exporting absinthe at prices unthinkable on the home market. But does it really make sense to sell a drink famous for reducing consumers to a state of gibbering idiocy?

The Czech Republic is one of the few places on earth that still permits production of absinthe, the emerald green wormwood liqueur made infamous by the likes of Oscar Wilde, Van Gogh and Toulouse Lautrec. A comparative advantage not to be sniffed at, thought four young Londoners when they discovered that a loophole in the law allowed the potent liqueur to be sold in England.

Calling themselves Green Bohemia, they started shipping the drink to London's trendier bars. Their supplier was Hill's, a distillery owned by the 80-year old Radomil Hill of Jindřichuv Hradec in south Bohemia. He has been making the stuff since the 1920s, going underground during the communist era. The launch in London enjoyed a blaze of publicity – boosted by clever marketing among absinthe freaks on the internet. President Václav Havel did his bit too, by sharing a glass of the 55% alcohol liquor with Germany's president during a recent visit.

Hill's rival is Martin Šebor of Krásná Lípa in northern Bohemia. A chemist by trade, he turned his hand to distilling exotic alcoholic drinks after the revolution. Digging around in old recipe books, he plumped for absinthe, which tickled his fancy due to its colour-changing properties and the neurotoxin thujone. It was this thujone that accounted for "convulsions, involuntary evacuations, abnormal respiration and foaming at the mouth" in dogs, according to French research published in the 1860s, a few decades before the drink was banned.

So are London's yuppies and Germany's rulers heading for imminent madness? Hill's goes very easy on the wormwood – the herb that contains thujone. Šebor's has upped its thujone content to the maximum allowed in the UK, the main export market for both. So the new worshippers of the Green Muse are probably safe from the risk of a 19th century-style wormwood overdose. The real risk for them, as for us all, is swallowing the hype of 20th century marketing men.

– FRANCIS HARRIS (PRAGUE)