

The Fight to Launch Viridian Spirits

After a long legal battle, Jared Gurfein finally packages absinthe and bottles the green fairy.

By Kristin Ladd | August 20, 2009

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When you look at how quickly Jared Gurfein's high-end liquor company, [Viridian Spirits](#), has grown within three years, you might think he has some kind of magic on his side. And maybe he does; after all, the green fairy is supposed to be flying in his bottles.

Absinthe, a spirit originally from France, is popularly known as the keeper of the green fairy; that is, the apparition you supposedly see when you drink the often emerald-tinged liquor. But if you ask Gurfein, the real absinthe is actually very distant from its hallucinogenic associations.

Absinthe's links to illicit drugs and narcotics, Gurfein--entrepreneur and lawyer--explained, are a recent development. "Absinthe has been badly misrepresented," says Gurfein. "When I first, tried it myself while working in London, I was exposed to horrible absinthe from Eastern Europe. Then, I tried lovely absinthe," says Gurfein.

After returning from two years in London, Gurfein continued to work full-time as a lawyer at a Wall Street law firm. Yet, with long hours that kept him from his family and the recession coming on, Gurfein soon went searching for other ways to practice law. He turned to his then friend, now partner, Jon Bonchick, for some advice on where he could find general counsel legal work. "However, before we even got to that, Jon asked me if I had any ideas about good alcohol products" because he was looking to start a new line of sophisticated spirits. "I immediately suggested absinthe."

Bonchick and Gurfein both knew that getting absinthe on the U.S. market would require a lot of risk-taking. During prohibition in the early 20th century, absinthe became illegal to distribute in the U.S. With its ties to drugs in the media, the case for legalizing absinthe was rather ominous. As Gurfein puts it, "Of course there are challenges in any business and the liquor business especially, but they were significantly higher for absinthe because it had a cloudy legal status."

True to his ambitious personality, Gurfein didn't let those obstacles slow him down. "In addition to being personally fascinated by it, I thought, 'wouldn't it be amazing if we could be the guys to grab the tiger by the tail?'" Gurfein recalls with a gleeful edge in his voice. So, in 2006, he went to the best alcohol lawyer he could find and introduced his plan to legalize absinthe.

"The government basically turned us away," says Gurfein, and it expected him to stay away. "But, I pressed on, and I did my research. As it turned out, there was no specific prohibition against absinthe." None of the ingredients in true Absinthe were illegal.

He then teamed up with T.A. Breaux--a chemist by training and a distiller by passion--to put his research to work. "T.A. had done some hard scientific research on vintage bottles and found that there was nothing in them that was illegal. They were well within the E.U. and U.S. legal standards." Really, it had been the wine industry's propaganda during the prohibition era that had outlawed absinthe. So, with a well-financed group of businessmen, the historical knowledge from Breaux and some driven attorneys, Gurfein went back to the government in full force.

The research and expertise certainly paid off. "At the end of the day, the government was very open-minded about the case for absinthe when they realized that we were very serious about it. We put Lucid in a bottle and gave it to the government to test." The chemistry went off without a hitch.

"But then we put 'absinthe' on the bottle label, and that's where the problem was. However, this was Breaux's specialty. We showed a historically accurate background on absinthe...we knew we were on the right side of the law and the facts."

After a thirteen-month legal campaign, the government finally allowed Viridian Spirits to label the bottle properly. Lucid went on the market in 2006 with a seductive, French-designed bottle, and began to sell to high-end liquor lovers throughout the U.S. Since then, they've added La Clandestine, a clear absinthe from a distiller in Switzerland and one of the Breaux's absinthes, Nouvelle Orleans. The ingredients are hand-picked, the liquor is smooth and business is running even smoother as they retain their focus on educating the public on quality absinthe and other high-end spirits.

What does Gurfein say is the best advice he could give based on this arduous, yet rewarding experience? "When people say it won't work, you don't give up even if you have to change tactics. Every time a hurdle popped up, we jumped over it or we changed our direction, but we were always moving forward. And anyone else motivated and perseverant enough can do the same."

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