

A version of this article appeared in print on January 29, 2009, on page A13 of the New York edition.

Kallnach Journal

A Swiss Village Has Peace, Quiet and a Product Endorsed by Marilyn Manson

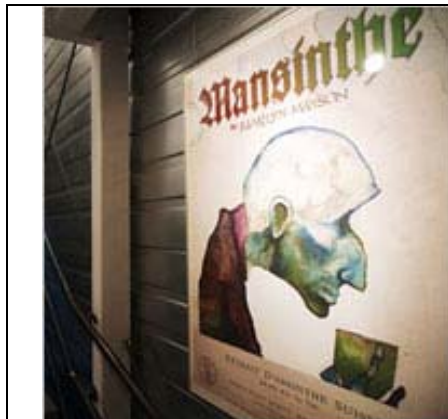


Roland Schmid for The New York Times

Oliver Matter, a Swiss distiller in Kallnach who makes Mansinthe.

By JOHN TAGLIABUE

Published: January 28, 2009



Roland Schmid for The New York Times

Mansinthe is an absinthe associated with Marilyn Manson



The New York Times

Absinthe's ingredients grow in abundance around Kallnach.

KALLNACH, Switzerland — Few people in this quiet village of quaint chalets know the album “Eat Me, Drink Me,” by Marilyn Manson, the shock rocker. But almost everyone knows his taste for absinthe.

There could hardly be a greater contrast between Mr. Manson, the American bad boy who introduced the golden age of grotesque, and the 1,500 people who live quietly in the squat farmhouses strung out along Kallnach’s main street, their eaves reaching almost to the ground.

“They’re completely different,” said Beat Läderach, 47, who has been the town manager for 17 years. “We live off the land, a very sleepy existence. But it has its advantages: There is little unemployment, no vandalism; life is modest, comfortable, friendly.”

Yet Mr. Manson’s link to the town “is important for us,” Mr. Läderach said. The name Kallnach has become well known, he said, thanks to the success of a superpremium absinthe developed with Mr. Manson.

In a sense, the hills and valleys northwest of Kallnach, otherwise known for clocks, could be called the cradle of absinthe. Wormwood, absinthe’s defining ingredient, as well as the other herbs that go into it, grow in abundance here, deep in Switzerland’s Jura Mountains. In the late 19th century, absinthe was so popular that in Paris it rivaled wine as the drink of choice. French impressionists, like Edgar Degas and Édouard Manet, not only drank it, but featured it in their works.

But absinthe, a liqueur that can have an alcohol content as high as 75 percent, was also known as the Green Fairy, a malicious sprite that was said to twist men’s — and women’s — minds and cause delirium, hallucinations, vertigo and even madness.

By the early 20th century, governments around the world were banning it. Absinthe lovers denied its toxicity, and blamed the wine industry for seeking to sideline a competitor.

(Modern analysis has shown that the absintnes produced today have none of these effects.)

So how did the link between the shock rock singer, actor and artist and this drowsy village come about? It began in 2005, after Switzerland, following the example of the United States and many countries in Europe, legalized the production of absinthe.

The man who revived absinthe in Kallnach is Oliver Matter, whose great-grandfather first distilled schnapps here in the 1920s and shipped products to the Chicago World’s Fair in 1933 under the brand name Will Tell.

In 2004, just two months before absinthe was legalized by a Swiss national referendum, Mr. Matter turned his stills, big copper spheres in a shed just outside of town, to making the liqueur. “Actually I didn’t want to,” he said, leading a visitor through the still. “But I had a recipe. My great-grandfather was once owed money by a livestock trader who couldn’t pay him, so he gave him a recipe for absinthe instead. I had big mountains of my great-grandfather’s papers, and that’s where I found the recipe.”

After absinthe was banned by the Swiss in 1910, it went underground. “You could find it in every household,” said Mr. Matter, 40, a lanky man with a shaven head. “It was kept as medicine.”

By one guess, more than 20,000 gallons of this moonshine absinthe were produced annually, an estimate made possible because the orderly Swiss were meticulous about paying the alcohol tax.

Obviously, the world was ripe for the return of absinthe. Within days of beginning production, Mr. Matter was contacted by distributors seeking to sell his absinthe in big markets like England, France and the United States, where absinthe was rapidly becoming a craze.

One of the distributors who contacted Mr. Matter was Markus Lion, 41, a compact, lively businessman from southern Germany who was looking for quality absinthe for a particular customer, Marilyn Manson, whose manager was friendly with Mr. Lion. “Absinthe was becoming a topic,” Mr. Lion said. “And Manson was known as a connoisseur of absinthe.”

After a concert in Basel, a Swiss city northeast of here, Mr. Lion met Mr. Manson, a.k.a. Brian Hugh Warner, and discovered they had friends and tastes in common, including absinthe. They agreed to produce a special absinthe, to be called Mansinthe, at Mr. Matter's distillery. After several trial distillations, Mansinthe was introduced in the summer of 2006, selling for about \$65 for a 24-ounce bottle. Sales soared in the remaining months of 2006, to more than four times the total amount of absinthe Mr. Matter sold the year before. Now absinthe accounts for about half his annual sales of \$1.3 million.

Soon the name Manson was on everyone's tongue in Kallnach. Now Fritz Meyer, 68, stocks Mansinthe on the liquor shelves of his butcher and grocery store along Kallnach's main road, next to bottles of Jack Daniel's and Baileys Irish Cream. He sells pork sausages flavored with absinthe. "They're very popular," he said.

Mansinthe, Mr. Lion said, "gave a real push to the absinthe world."

"We didn't have to do much else," he continued. "Manson was already a very controversial figure, just like the artists of the 19th century. So for me he was the ideal partner."

Mr. Matter, who now has a T-shirt with the words "The Manson Gang" and "66.6 percent," for the alcohol content of Mansinthe, said he was astounded by how well Mr. Manson was accepted locally, though he had never visited the village. "Curiously, no one ever came to us and said, 'Why are you doing something like this?'"

Stefan Johner, 19, said he was not surprised. An apprentice mechanic who fixes tractors, he said he had never tried absinthe, preferring beer or wine, or whiskey or vodka if he wanted stronger drink. But he agreed that absinthe had a "certain tradition" locally.

Did Marilyn Manson fit in that tradition? "A little bit for sure," he said. "He's a little bit crazy," he went on, his hands deep in the pockets of greasy blue overalls. "In Kallnach there are perfectly normal people, but also some who are a little bit crazy."