



## HISTORY

Pure coincidence? Telepathy? Or was some kind of happy serendipity at work on Tuesday, November 13, 2001? Picture yours truly in front of the computer, writing a brief history of the Kübler distillery from its beginnings in 1863 to the present day for the next Fête de l’Absinthe brochure – the one you’re reading now. Kübler is the only alcoholic beverages producer in the Val-de-Travers district still operating today, despite being out of commission from 1962 to 1990. It seemed to me that this fact alone called for a more detailed account of the company. Then, at 3.45 pm, the phone rang. I was invited, along with a mutual friend, to drop everything and hurry to the Blackmint distillery in



Môtiers where Yves Kübler had a big surprise for us. Minutes later, as we entered the northern ground-floor premises at 2 Rue du Creux-aux-Loups, we couldn’t fail to recognize the smell emanating from the big copper still in front of us. Gleaming like a trophy, this still was made by the Arnold Holstein copperworks in Markdorf-Bodensee in 1992 and the unmistakable aromas wafting out of it were a clear indication of what distillate flowed slowly and inexorably out of its cooler.

After months of surreptitious trials and tough negotiations with the various federal and cantonal authorities, Yves Kübler had finally managed to produce genuine absinthe extract that complied with current Swiss legislation and, what’s more, was EU-compatible! In our host’s office, we took part in an initial sampling focusing on appearance, aromas and taste. Though very compelling, there was still scope for perfecting the drink further. The most obvious and urgent improvement would be to use authentic absinthe wormwood (*Artemisia Absinthium*) grown locally in Val-de-Travers

using traditional techniques rather than plants imported from Germany, Poland or elsewhere. Experienced distillers insist that soil quality, climate, altitude, maturing and harvesting times – and of course the local growers’ traditional expertise – all exert a decisive influence on the aromas exuded by this rustic plant, which are surprisingly difficult to draw out to their full potential. Already back in 1836, Dr. Charles-Henri Allamand’s book *Statistique de la Châtellenie du Val-de-Travers* claimed that when it comes to absinthe extract, “most plants required in its composition succeed nowhere so well as here.”

Such a time-honored drink naturally deserves a fitting vessel: a dark green bottle; a silvered shrink cap; a light blue label with a border, also silvered; a white Swiss cross on a red background; whitish sprigs of absinthe wormwood and the words “Extrait d’absinthe Kübler distillé au Val-de-Travers (Neuchâtel), apéritif anisé suisse à base de plantes d’absinthe, 45 % vol.” (“Kübler absinthe extract distilled in Val-de-Travers, Neuchâtel); aniseed-flavored apéritif derived from absinthe plants, 45 % vol.”); and a back label in three languages – French, German and English – mentioning “Produit du terroir” and guaranteeing natural, high-quality botanical ingredients.

91 years and 3 days after the “green fairy” was banned, Kübler’s sample, producing using his specialized distilling equipment, passed muster with the powers that be, so much so that they gave him the green light to officially take up absinthe-making operations again! Already a number of unenlightened Swiss and international liquor barons are contesting Kübler’s historic achievement; admittedly, he hasn’t single-handedly revived the shelved apéritif, because aficionados never stopped producing it in secret during the near-century



it was banned. But he’s brought it back to life and up to date, so that it now complies with modern-day standards: an alcoholic strength of 45 degrees (the maximum allowed); a thujone level of 0.1 mg per liter (whereas up to 10 mg/l is allowed by law); and a blend of nine aromatic plants, including 1 kg of absinthe wormwood for 100 liters of absinthe.

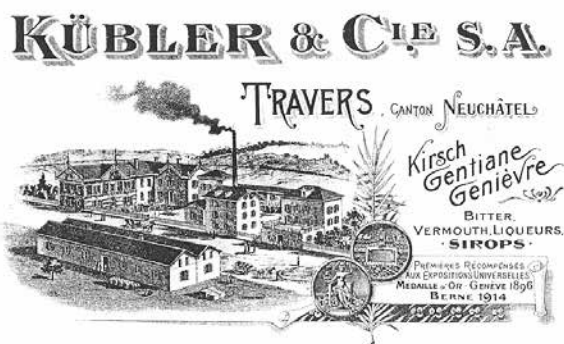
We're talking about the real thing here. This isn't one of those sketchy fake absinthe drinks that are produced and sold all over the world. At last, here's a spirit that's as close as possible – give or take some necessary adjustments – to the original created in Couvet by Daniel Henri Dubied and Henri-Louis Pernod in the late 18th century. They were the certified producers who promoted and distributed authentic “couèchte” on an industrial and international scale.



great-grandson to Jacob Frédéric Kübler (1830-1901), the son of Jean Jacob and Euphosina, née Braunlin. All three of these forebears headed the renowned family business at 26 Rue des Moulins in Travers, where up to fifty people were employed in the office and as sales reps.

Yves Kübler, the man who has earned his distillery this belated exoneration, is far from untutored in the arts and crafts of his trade. Look no further than the aniseed-flavored apéritif called “La Rincette®” that he developed in 1990. This artisanal distillation based on green anise, fennel and other aromatic plants (45% vol.) was introduced about eighty years after another ersatz beverage, “L'Opale”, which his ancestor concocted only two years after taking over operations at Léon Boichard (founded in 1935; see booklet on the first Fête de l’Absinthe, June 20, 1998, pp. 17-18). Kübler also won a gold medal at the second Forum Romand des Eaux-de-vie held at Courtemelon in the Jura canton, on March 25, 2001. It's hardly surprising that this local boy has such a talent for it given the “green blood” of three generations of distillers and absinthe-makers that runs in his veins! His father was Marco Carlo Kübler (\*1933) who married Maria Vera, née Dorigo. Yves Kübler (\*1966) is grandson to Fritz Jules Kübler, known as Fritz II (1897-1963), who married Bona Marta, née Salvioni, great-grandson to Frédéric Emile Kübler, known as Fritz I (1869-1946), who married Louise Catherine, née Demarchi, and great-

The epic saga of this dynasty began in Travers in 1863 (1), when the first absinthe distillery was created in the village by two men: Jacob Frédéric Kübler and Henri Haag from Couvet (whose family had settled in the area in 1813) and his wife Sophie-Louisa, née Jeanrenaud (daughter of Ami Simon Jeanrenaud from Travers). Following Henri Haag's death on December 27, 1875, a new partnership contract was drawn up by local notary Alphonse Blanc. It confirmed the dissolution of the former company partnership as of July 31, 1875 and the establishment of a limited partnership on August 1, 1875 under the name “Haag, Kübler & Company”, with Frédéric Auguste Romang as associate. Romang was a salesman from Châtelet in the Bern canton, and the son of Christian. The contract states that, “The company deals with the production and sale of absinthe extract, vermouth, fine liqueurs and other similar products.” Its share capital was set at 100,000 Swiss francs, divided as follows: Frédéric-Auguste Romang had CHF 10,000, while the widowed Sophie Louisa Haag and Jacob Frédéric Kübler had CHF 45,000 each. Oddly, despite what is noted in the 1875 company statutes, invoices and envelopes dated 1895-1896 still bore the label “Veuve Haag, Travers (Suisse)” (“Widow Haag, Travers, (Switzerland)”). Sophie-Louisa Haag appears to have retired from Kübler & Romang at some unknown date, before handing her affairs over to Arthur Fraissard-Guillaume at 6 Rue Edouard-Dubied, Couvet, in 1897.



It has been established that Jacob Frédéric Kübler, a native of Welmlingen in the Grand Duchy of Baden, Germany, came to settle in Travers from 1875. He had lived in Neuchâtel from 1833, subsequently moving to Couvet and then to Môtiers. In 1881, he was naturalized and authorized to practice his trade in Travers. A birth certificate issued before witnesses on February 6, 1869 by Louis Jeanrenaud, civil registrar for Môtiers-

ers, states that: “In this year eighteen hundred and sixty-nine, on the fifth of February at one o'clock in the morning, in Môtiers, was born to Jacob Frédéric Kübler, aged thirty-seven, salesman, and his wife Euphrosina Braunlin, aged thirty, both residing in Môtiers, a male child, whose given names are Frédéric Emile (the future Fritz I); the child's paternal grandparents are Jean Jacob Kübler and Marie Madelaine Sutterlin; his maternal grandparents are Jean Braunlin and Katharina Barbara Vogt”. At the end of 1875, the Taxpayers' Roll in Travers lists Sophie-Louisa Haag, saleswoman, and Jacob Frédéric Kübler, distiller, as having taxable wealth of CHF 35,000 each. In the 1883 edition of Neuchâtel's Commercial Guide, the widow Haag was still listed as a “limited partner liable for a sum of CHF 45,000 in the factory belonging to Frédéric Emile Kübler, known as Fritz I, and Frédéric-Auguste Romang, partners with unlimited liability.” Why is it that over a decade later, records show that Madame Haag still owned a business of her own (“Manufactory of Absinthe, Vermouth & Kirsch, Fine Liqueurs and Assorted Cordials”), employing a certain Mr. J Bretscher as her traveling sales rep and a Mr. A. Robert as her authorized agent? This mystery has yet to be resolved...



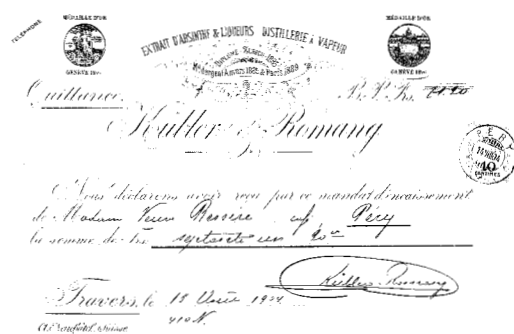
The company name “Kübler & Romang” certainly dates from 1884 and was kept on by the sons of the owners mentioned earlier – Fritz Jules Kübler, known as Fritz II, and Auguste Romang (1877-1955), who was a governor (préfet) of Val-de-Travers from 1927 to 1929, and then of Les Montagnes from 1929 to 1943. In due course, the company was renamed “Kübler & Cie S.A.”, and both Jean-Pierre Joly and Maurice Nagel took their turns at the helm. The business was forced to close down in 1962, twenty-eight years before Yves Kübler took up the reins once more.

In 1908, just before the Swiss voted in favor of the prohibition of absinthe, the famous Travers steam-operated distillery was at the height of its output. The years between 1902 and 1906 had been especially good, with average annual consumption of 95° proof eau-de-vie standing at 82,000 kg. It ranked sec-

ond among all the local and Swiss producers, behind C. Berger de Couvet (95,000 kg) but ahead of Giovenni, Bovet & Cie in Môtiers, Sandoz & Fils in Môtiers, Dornier-Tüller & Cie in Fleurier, Edouard Pernod S.A. in Couvet, Legler-Pernod also in Couvet, J.F. von Almen & Cie in Fleurier, Th. Henny Fils in Fleurier, L.-A. Bolle in Les Verrières, A. Fraissard in Couvet, J. Ammann in Fleurier and J. Borel-Pettavel in Môtiers (9,000 kg).

As well as distilling absinthe extract, which was delivered to Geneva by rail – an overhead pipeline from the factory poured the liquor directly into tank-carriages standing ready on the tracks below – the Kübler family produced and/or sold fine liqueurs (such as the celebrated: “Drink Kinagin, the vermouth apéritif with quinquina and gin!”, and a cherry liqueur promoted as “a bouquet” from the Travers distillery), vermouth, kirsch, bitters, cognac, rum, gentian schnapps (a house specialty revived in 1991 by Yves Kübler under the name “Sun 7”) and cordials. On top of all that, they even made wine from the grapes grown in their Neuchâtel vineyards! Also worth a mention is their aniseed-flavored apéritif, “L'Opale”, of which production began on October 7, 1910. It was the heir apparent to “the green fairy”!

Today, the acknowledged “Godfather” of the officially recognized fairy still offers a fine array of specialty eaux-de-vies: “We are passionate about producing Kübler® schnapps to the highest standards of flavor and aroma, all packaged in original bottles. Those who enjoy eau-de-vie will love the perfectly harmonious bal-



ance of flavors in our fruit brandies made from quinces, raspberries, gentian, Mirabelle plums, Williams pears, or little wild plums. Our cherry liqueur, “La Cerisette”™, will be appreciated by those who enjoy sweet spirits and is also ideal for food and cooking enthusiasts, who can use it to prepare sauces for duck, fried foie gras or iced desserts. The latest addition to our range is a wild peach schnapps that will doubtlessly appeal to liqueur-lovers who like their spirits slightly sweet but with a deep fruity flavor. To be drunk either very chilled, or with champagne! The Môtiers company also produces the celebrated Blackmint© mint cordial (with or without colorants), along with a range of pure fruit juices such as raspberry, blackcurrant, orange or lemon, and grenadine and lemongrass cordials. “The Kübler family business also has one last string to its bow, which is showing great potential: producing and selling drinks for big nightclubs and bars. We import some of the alcohols, such as whiskey, gin and vodka, and we make our own drinks, such as the “Kamikaze”, for instance, which is very popular in French-speaking Switzerland. This is the product that got us into bars and clubs. Gradually, people started ordering lots of other things from us. What’s our best asset? Definitely our versatility and originality! We can even create cocktails to suit the theme of a particular night,” adds the head distiller, whose creative flair is evident in both the packaging and the products. “I realized that the concept, and therefore the packaging, of drinks is hugely important when selling beverages.”

The story of the Kübler family business stands out both for its longevity and its creativity. It’s been operating since 1863 with a hiatus from 1962 to 1990, and has earned glittering prizes throughout its existence: a Grand Diploma of Honor at the first Swiss National Exhibition in Zurich, 1883; a silver medal at the World’s Fair in Antwerp, 1885; a Grand Diploma of Honor in Paris, 1886-87; a silver medal at the World’s Fair in Paris, 1889; gold medals at the second and third

Swiss National Exhibitions in Geneva, 1896, and in Bern, 1914; and a gold medal at the second Forum Romand des Eaux-de-vie in Courtemelon, 2001.

While we wait for the next accolade to be awarded, what of the AOC (or PDO – Protected Designation of Origin) label? And how about a trademarked name for the extract that Yves Kübler and his peers (some working under patent) cook up in the centuries-old cradle of absinthe? Local producers in the Val-de-Travers are once again actively lobbying the authorities after negotiations were put on hold for two years, with a raft of strong arguments and solid support from outside backers.

(1) S. Edmond Couleur: *Au Pays de l’absinthe*, 1908, S. 244, Georges Droz: *L’absinthe... liaison dangereuse*, 1988, S. 95, Eric-andré Klausner, 1. fête de l’absinthe, Boveresse 20. Juni 1998, 18, und 3. fête de l’absinthe, Boveresse 24. Juni 2000, 13; Mariano de Cristofano: *La troublante saga de la famille Kübler de Travers, distillateurs de génération en génération* in L’Express, 27.02.2001, Benoit Noël: *L’absinthe, une fée franco-suisse*, 2001, S. 34, o. N.: *Distillerie Blackmint Kübler & Wyss, Môtiers*, in Pays neuchâtelois, Vie économique et culturelle, Nr. 18, Winter 1999; Archive der Familie Kübler, aufbewahrt von Yves Kübler in Môtiers und Frédéric Kübler in Travers.

