

City University of New York (CUNY)

CUNY Academic Works

Capstones

Craig Newmark Graduate School of Journalism

Fall 12-16-2016

Drink Me and Abort Your Baby: The Herbal Abortion Tea

Maya Lewis

Cuny Graduate School of Journalism

[How does access to this work benefit you? Let us know!](#)

More information about this work at: https://academicworks.cuny.edu/gj_etds/152

Discover additional works at: <https://academicworks.cuny.edu>

This work is made publicly available by the City University of New York (CUNY).

Contact: AcademicWorks@cuny.edu

Drink Me and Abort Your Baby: The Herbal Abortion Tea

By Maya Lewis

Through the glass front door of the Sacred Vibes Apothecary in Ditmas Park, Brooklyn a jar of black cohosh root sits on the middle of the top shelf, in between jars of astragalus root powder and broadleaf.

The label reads: “Black Cohosh Root (*Cimicifuga racemosa*) Relaxant and normalizer of female reproductive system. Painful and delayed menses, ovarian cramps, or womb cramps.”

It’s best for, among other things — aborting a baby.

I asked for two ounces of the herb. Melissa Edwards, the herbalist on staff, walked over to the towering wall and stood on her tiptoes to grab the jar, just inches above her arms reach. She was tiny with a kind smile and shoulder-length hair that she often kept tucked behind her ears. The shop was empty. She walked behind the counter and began to pour the earthy, mulch-like substance into a small brown paper bag sitting on an electronic scale.

They were running low on black cohosh root and so the price had been raised to \$18.00 an ounce, she said. I looked around the shop and rattled off the names of several other herbs that could do the job, hoping to find a better deal— blue cohosh root, cotton root bark, mugwort, Queen Anne’s lace, pennyroyal. Each had an expansive history of helping woman regulate their cycles, control fertility and carry out abortions.

“Mugwort we have,” she said. “But pennyroyal...” She trailed off, her eyes scanning the labels of each jar.

It wasn’t up there. Not at all, not even an empty jar with a peeling and faded label.

“It must be in the basement, give me just a second.”

Abortion is among the most controversial topics in America, right next to Donald Trump. Combine the two and watch embroilment ensue.

The president-elect has made it clear that he has plans to do what he can to repeal Roe v. Wade while in office. The 1973 Supreme Court case gave women the right to safe clinical abortions. If overturned, all regulation regarding abortion and abortive health care would fall on states, many of whom are already doing what they can to limit abortion access. In the first six months of this year, thirty-five percent of all legislation relating to sexual and reproductive health and rights sought to restrict access to abortive healthcare. The state of Ohio recently passed legislation called “the heartbeat bill,” making abortion after six weeks illegal, around the time a fetal heartbeat can be detected. Many women don’t realize they’re pregnant until several weeks after this date.

We're on our way to a new normal — flying out to get an abortion three states over, if you can afford that.

Legal abortion never *guaranteed* your abortion, should you choose to have one. Financial constraints and proximity has often affected a woman's ability to get an abortion. As the pro-life movement and a republican-controlled government rally to hinder or repeal abortion legislation, women better start bulk buying birth control. Soon, your local planned parenthood or clinic might not be there, then what?

At-home abortion as an alternative is on a steady rise. This includes medicinal abortion also known as the abortion pill, vacuum aspiration (when done by a trained practitioner or midwife) and, at the very bottom of the list, herbal abortion.

An herbal abortion is exactly what it sounds like — a series of herbs that, if taken at the right time, in the right form and dosage, can induce a miscarriage. Your clinic doctor will never recommend it, neither will your physician. In fact, they have come out vehemently against it. Herbal abortion is unregulated, under researched and often unpredictable. Very little mainstream medical research has been done on it. For information on herbal abortion, myths, facts, horrors and success, you'll have to seek out a skilled and open-minded herbalist, or midwife.

And even that can be a challenge. Herbalists and midwives all over the country have also come out against herbal abortion. The ones that are not against it, make a point to keep quiet. Much more so than clinical abortion, herbal abortion is steeped in stigma. Both the pro-choice and pro-life movements are anti-herbal abortion. Abortion is legal, so why would a woman choose to take an herb when she can go to her local Planned Parenthood. Ultimately it's called Pro-Choice, not *pro-choices*.

Even with our millennial-minded safe spaces, our progressive, politically correct Pro-Choice pins and #ShoutYourAbortion still making the rounds on Twitter, herbal abortion is masked by the shadow of the coat hanger. The horrific symbol of all non-clinical abortions — the emblem of pure desperation, wielded only in a dark alleyway by an unlicensed doctor on a woman with absolutely no other options. But with half of our country doing what they can to prohibit the practice of clinical abortion, herbal abortion is on it's way to once again becoming a more realistic and affordable option, for better or worse.

Melissa walked out of Sacred Vibes and down into the sidewalk cellar in search of pennyroyal. She came back up with a large clear bag of a dried plant that vaguely resembled grass feed. It didn't look or smell like much of anything but we both knew that taking pennyroyal without the proper guidance or instruction could easily land me in the hospital. I reassured her that I was not pregnant — that I wanted to know what the process was and learn the history of this disturbingly risky and equally magical tea that could abort a baby.

Open your pantry and you might find some of the same herbs that are on the shelves of Sacred Vibes — basil, oregano, maybe thyme or rosemary. All of those are from the mint family. Two-hundred and thirty-six genera with 7,534 different species and pennyroyal is among them. Luckily your pesto pasta is safe. Pennyroyal is the only herb of the mint family with the power to abort and it's popularity as a cooking herb has been on a steady decline since the start of the 20th century.

As an essential oil, pennyroyal will almost certainly kill anyone who uses it carelessly. The plant is often used as an ingredient in all-natural animal flea collars like the Naturally Best Herbal Dog Collar or the PetGuard Herbal Cat Collar, both priced at about six dollars. When ingested, one tablespoon of the essential oil is the equivalent of 1000 cups of pennyroyal herbal tea. Nausea, vomiting, fatigue, liver and kidney failure, hallucinations and seizures are all caused by pennyroyal oil overdoses — typically by young women seeking to self-induce their abortion. Since 1996, seventeen women have died from pennyroyal oil overdoses.

Melissa stapled the two tiny brown paper bags of herbs and wrote out the names Pennyroyal and Mugwort in black sharpie on the front. I stared at the “All Sales Final” sign below the register as she rung up my purchase. Two ounces of Mugwort and two ounces of pennyroyal came to a whopping \$13.91. A surgical abortion in comparison is priced between \$300 and \$500 on average. The abortion pill costs about the same. Aspiration abortion, when done in the first 12 weeks, comes in between \$300 and \$950. I had spent less than twenty bucks and walked out the door with a backpack full of herbs, ingredients for nature's own Plan-B pill.

Up until the 1800s, nearly every abortion was an herbal abortion. It wasn't until the 1970s that surgical abortion began to increase in popularity and safety after Roe v Wade. Prior to, abortifacient herbs were as strong an option as any other when considering abortion. In the right quantity abortifacients can cause the uterus to contract and miscarry during pregnancy. They are often used in conjunction with “helping herbs” or emmenagogue herbs, like mugwort, rue and blue cohosh, which stimulate blood flow to the uterus and promote menstruation. Reportedly there are 525 abortifacient plant species. In the right dosage, 43% of those have been proven to stimulate uterine tissue in vitro. The wrong dosage can be poisonous in many cases but dosage can vary woman to woman.

Abortifacients block the production of the hormone progesterone, which occurs naturally in the female body. The drug is key in thickening the lining of the uterus to prepare it for a fertilized egg. When a fertilized egg has been implanted into the lining of the uterus, progesterone levels spike to aid in its nourishment. If the body does not receive a fertilized egg, levels drop and the uterus contracts and sheds the lining in a bloody mucus mess called menstruation. In blocking progesterone, abortifacient herbs effectively trick the uterus into thinking there is no fertilized egg in need of nourishment. No fertilized egg means no pregnancy and so the uterus

begins menstruation. It contracts and sheds its lining including the fertilized egg, terminating the pregnancy.

In most cases, surgical abortion, like getting a tooth pulled, is an in-and-out procedure. During herbal abortion on the other hand a woman can bleed for anywhere from 1 to 2 weeks.

Perhaps the most relevant and widely discussed reason women choose non-clinical alternatives like herbal abortion is proximity. Several counties throughout the south and midwest of this country are 100+ miles from a clinic. Eighteen and a half percent of all Texas counties are 200+ miles away from a clinic. The idea of the local clinic takes on a whole new identity when it's four towns away.

Though, this isn't the case everywhere. At the same time that women in Texas are a Greyhound bus ride away from a clinic, women on the west coast and north-eastern coast are at maximum 25 miles away. As of 2011, the state of New York had 225 abortion providers. Ninety-four of those were clinics. That same year it was revealed that women ages 30 to 34 are more likely to have attempted to self-induce their abortion rather than going to a clinic. Herbal abortion isn't always a last resort, as many believe. Some women choose it, even when there is a clinic nearby.

"In truth, the reasons women may choose to end a pregnancy at home are strikingly similar to the reasons women may choose to birth at home," said certified midwife Molly Dutton-Kenny, in her piece *The Midwife As Abortion Provider*. Over the years, in which she has educated 600+ men and woman on abortive care, Dutton-Kenny has come across several reasons, not often discussed, as to why a woman would choose an herbal abortion. They go far beyond a last resort decision.

Other possible reasons, she said, include: "1) Uncomfortability in medical settings — physically, emotionally, spiritually, or philosophically 2) Uncomfortability with clinics that require certain tests and procedures 3) Received less-than-compassionate care at clinics in the past for previous abortion or other fertility care 4) Use holistic medicine for all their other health concerns and don't see why an abortion should be any different 5) Lack of funds 6) No longer trust providers to be knowledgeable and be sensitive about their specific bodies or needs."

When needs aren't being met women turn their attention to the alternatives. Even when they are accessible, not all clinics are perfect places of pristine healthcare and service. According to Dutton-Kenny, women have been made to feel that they should just be thankful for the option they have instead of exploring the others.

Pennyroyal Tea was going on to be the third single on Nirvana's last studio album *In Utero*, before Kurt Cobain's death in 1994. They only performed it once, on MTV unplugged. "Sit and drink Pennyroyal Tea, distill the life that's inside of me," he sang. This is an accurate description

of pennyroyal tea and its uses, depending on your politics behind defining “life.” In my apartment, I poured the pennyroyal herb onto a plate. It spilled out in a loose puff of dust. I swirled it around with my finger.

I am not the first to make an herbal abortion tea. Midwives in Salem had burned at the stake for such things, labeled witches. Slaves and Native American women used a similar herb, the peacock flower, trying to spare their unborn children. Egyptian Pharaohs had written of such things in the The Egyptian Ebers Papyrus in 1550bc. Herbal abortion is older than every person living on this planet. It was a way women cared for themselves and one another for a millennium. A little pebble of empowerment, it gave them complete control and sovereignty over the one thing that was considered their greatest value — fertility. Even as medicine professionalized becoming more male, and then again more white, women have been able to kept the traditions of herbal healthcare alive.

The pennyroyal looked like dried sod with tiny flecks of purple from what were once bright lavender flowers. I poured my helping herb, mugwort, beside the pennyroyal. It was clumpy and thick, like couch stuffing or old wall insulation, with each piece clinging to others as it fell from the bag. The mugwort smelled, only slightly stronger, of dried grass feed. It reminded me of allergy season.

If you aren’t pregnant, both herbs hold a series of other uses. Pennyroyal is a natural insecticide. Mugwort is helpful with reducing pain from menstruation cramps. When smoked mugwort can curb nicotine addiction. In a tea, it can aid with digestion, liver function and induce some trippy lucid dreaming.

I placed a tiny bit of the pennyroyal on my tongue and savored it.

Toward the end of the first century, the Roman poet Gaius Valerius Catullus was at near obsession with his girlfriend, Clodia Metelli. He wrote 25 poems about her — wishing to be the sparrow at her bosom, cursing her name for being with others, missing her so passionately he felt near suicidal.

His 7th poem, was about their sex. “You ask, my Lesbia, how many of your kisses are enough,” he writes. “As big a number as the grains of sand that lie at silphium producing Cyrene.” He certainly was romantic but it was Catullus’ reference to silphium that points to his predisposition for safe sex.

Silphium was a stocky fennel-like plant that could only be found in the ancient Greco-Roman city of Cyrene, or modern day Libya. It was spicy and bitter. Its likeness is pictured on the back of every Cyrenian coin between 570 and 250 BC. Worth its weight in silver, silphium was a pillar of the city’s economy. It was the second major export to grain. And what about this plant was of

such importance to the cradle of modern civilization? Silphium is believed to have been used as, among other things, an abortifacient. It could prevent implantation and cause abortion, similar to the two ounces of mugwort and pennyroyal I bought at Sacred Vibes Apothecary in Brooklyn.

Sadly, woman of today will never know the power of this potent plant. There will be no clinical trials of *Silphi*, the miracle abortifacient, coming to a CVS near you. No cheerful commercial with a cool 20-something white woman telling you how chomping on silphium once a day has let her focus on her goal of opening for Arcade Fire at Bonnaroo while still exploring her sexuality. By the fifth century silphium had all but vanished. The plant was never able to be cultivated outside of Cyrene and so, the Cyrenians harvested the plant into extinction.

A deep and old history of woman's healthcare told me that the dried plants on my plant could work just as well as silphium. But there are many often overlooked contingencies. Herbal abortion is not easy. The effectiveness of an herbal abortion depends on the woman, the herbs, the recipe, how far into the pregnancy she is, her herbal knowledge, and her emotional state. It's not regulated and it never will be.

The two hundred and twenty-five abortifacients with infinite combinations, that change like a Rubik's cube, for each woman's unique situation could never be monetized. There is no herbal abortion tea or tincture that will work for every woman. There is no specific dosage that will work perfectly for each person's body chemistry. Herbalists and midwives will continue to do what they've always done — help women who seek them out.

It would seem obvious that the pro-life movement is against herbal abortion — they're against induced abortion in all of its forms. More surprising then, is that herbal abortions biggest critic comes from the pro-choice movement.

Herbalists, midwives and anyone else that supports herbal abortion, face the most pushback from the pro-choice community and fellow feminists. There isn't much research or statistics on the effectiveness of herbal abortion, but there are plenty of horror stories which paint the process as unnecessarily risky. Most women who have successful herbal abortions aren't out reporting them. It only makes news if something goes terribly wrong.

Estimates place success somewhere between the vast percentage gap of 40 and 80 percent, when done during the first eight weeks of a pregnancy. This is compared to the 98 percent success rate for all suction curettage abortions done in clinics.

Many pro-choice advocates and doctors alike are of the mind that supporting herbal abortion is counterproductive to the progress of women's abortion rights. They fought and protested to legalize clinical abortion so they wouldn't have to use herbal remedies.

On the floor of Sacred Vibes, just below the shelves and shelves of herbs, there is a haphazard and dusty collection of books. Buried among them is *Wise Woman Herbal for the Childbearing Year* by Susun Weed. It is full of herbal remedies and research on women's health. From time to time, Melissa will consult it to refresh her memory on a specific plant. Susun Weed's book has become a bible of sorts for woman's herbal healthcare.

Weed is a master herbalist and midwife. She lives in the backwoods of Woodstock, New York, down a long winding road with no lights. She wears bandanas of every color wrapped around her head to hold back her long gray hair like Willie Nelson. They're matched perfectly to her frock of the day.

She doesn't have a television or a radio, nor does she read the newspaper, but she does know of nearly every use for an herbal remedy. She can talk about chickweed's ability to get rid of bacteria infections, wild yams ability to stop headaches in menopausal women, how a St. Joan's wort tincture can cure a muscle spasm or yellow dock root as a way to increase iron. She also knows a lot about herbal abortion. Having studied herbs for the last five decades, Weed is an expert in women's herbal healthcare and fertility. She's somewhat of a celebrity in the herbalism community. Melissa almost apprenticed with her. Her herbology classes and apprenticeships range from \$3,300 and \$6,600 for varying live-in intensives.

Susan Weed is a hardcore, second-wave feminist and was one of the first to publish on abortifacient herbs in 1985. At that point she hid the topic under the guise of emmenagogues, herbs that stimulate blood flow in the uterus to help with menstruation. Her books and websites list herbs, recipes and dosages for preparing an herbal abortion. Herbalists, midwives, and doulas regularly seek her out and reference her work on herbal healthcare, abortion included. On Wednesdays between 11–4pm, she allows people, mostly woman, to call her directly for advice. On rare occasions a woman will call and ask what herbal remedies work best for the untimely alimnt of a baby. She has one of the most comprehensive herbal abortion resources on the Internet.

I called during her during her office hours.

"Woman conceive and carry, in their own bodies, our future generation, in a country in which we have equality under the law that allows them to choose what they do with their bodies," she said. Her voice was low and full of long pauses.

How do you feel about herbal abortion?

"Well certainly herbal abortion has been used throughout the centuries, with more or greater success," she said. "But I also want you to understand that while it's not perfectly safe, that medical abortion is far safer than herbal abortion."

She has the full support of the Center for Disease Control and Prevention on identifying herbal abortions as unsafe. The CDC surveils legally induced abortion rates throughout the country using clinic data. Herbal abortion often does not fall into the category of a “legally induced abortion” which is defined as “an intervention performed by a licensed clinician (e.g., a physician, nurse-midwife, nurse practitioner, or physician assistant) that is intended to terminate an ongoing pregnancy.” Herbal abortions are designated as self-induced abortion, meaning they are done outside of a medical establishment. They fall into the category of “unsafe” abortions. Less than 50,000 of all U.S. abortions annually are considered unsafe.

“The fact of the matter is that herbal abortion is neither safe, dependable nor easy,” said Weed. “Women who involve themselves in it are involving themselves in something that is undermining every woman’s right to have an abortion.”

Susun Weed, a woman whose books had positively aided women in procuring their own herbal abortions over the last three decades, is against herbal abortion.

It might be the one thing she has in common with the pro-life movement.

She went on to belabor the point, mentioning that many women in underdeveloped countries with illegal abortion are often forced to seek herbal abortions as their only option. They risk illness, death or that the tonic, tincture or tea simply won’t work. It is a risk they *have* to take, she says, but some women in America choose it to Weed’s clear displeasure. “This is not something casual that we are talking about here,” she said.

Consider her argument — American women are ingesting herbs to induce abortion, instead of going to a clinic, while 66 countries in the world prohibit abortion entirely and herbal remedies, in many cases, are their only choice. Consider the Irish woman, the Nigerian woman, the Venezuelan woman — each denied abortion by their government. Could herbal abortion be the ultimate American decadence?

Susun Weed lived through abortion’s legalization in America. She can remember a time when obtaining a safe abortion was quite the difficult task. She finds it frustrating, she said, to then see her descendants choose, what Weed sees as, an unnecessary risk. Modern American women have killed themselves trying herbal abortion; several have been arrested for attempting it after 24 weeks.

Women in New York, Idaho, South Carolina and Massachusetts have been arrested and charged for self-inducing their own abortions. Several states have laws that forbid anyone but a state sanctioned physician from performing an abortion. At least seventeen women have been prosecuted for attempting to self-induce their own abortion with abortifacients. A slip of the tongue to the wrong person or a medical emergency during the abortion could land a woman in prison.

“I don’t think women should use herbs for abortion,” said Weed. “I don’t think you should look online or consult an herbalist — I think you shouldn’t do it.”

So, have you ever administered a herbal abortion?

She tensed up. “No one administers or gives herbs to anyone,” she snapped back. “I can give you, as I am doing, information about herbs.” As for the herbalists who believe in “giving herbs” to others, Weed categorizes them as herbalists pretending to be physicians she said, disgusted. Almost like a disclaimer she ended with, “I am in the information business and only in the information business,” she said in a serious but matter-of-fact tone. “What you decide to do with that information is completely up to you.”

It sounded like a cop out. One of herbal abortions most dangerous pitfalls is the misinformation flooding the internet. Google “Herbal Abortion” and pages of websites, blogs and articles come up, each claiming to be the herbal abortion expert, her’s among them. The internet has emboldened many frustrated woman to believe that she could easily do-it-herself. Misinformation is often what leads to instances of accidental poisoning, under dosing (leading to issues during pregnancy) and death, in certain cases.

Spearmint. I swirled the pennyroyal on my tongue and it tasted a little bit like spearmint. But wintergreen gum flavoring aside, I knew that for a tea like this to actually work it would take much more than a pinch. On average, they require several cups over a few days or weeks. I put a tablespoon of pennyroyal and mugwort into a coffee cup and poured one cup of boiling water over it. I let it steep for twenty minutes, and then strained out the herbs. It smelled minty and medicinal — the same way it tasted.

I only took a sip. I didn’t want to take anymore than that. I wasn’t pregnant.

Looking down into the golden muddy concoction, I stirred it with my spoon staring at the tiny but powerful little specks that remain, swirling and sticking to the side of my mug. It looked normal. It looked like any other tea — yet therein lied the magic. I could have been labeled a witch for making this tea in 1692.

It was unsuspecting —therein lied its appeal.

This small cup of tea looked no different than the peppermint and camomile tea in my cabinet. No different than the tea in your Starbucks cup. It smelled no different. The water looked just as murky, steamy and delicious.

1,028,355 abortions have taken place so far this year. Around 48%, or rather 49,3610 of those abortions were from unintended pregnancies. 14,397 of those abortions will be self-induced (using methods other than the medical abortion pill). Though many self-induced abortions are never reported.

Herbal abortion is private in a way that abortion has not been for a very long time. There are no clinic appointments, stethoscopes or sonograms. It's cheap. It can be done at home where you can keep it a secret. With that privacy comes a dicey caveat, simply put — don't fuck it up, your life depends on it.