

## S P I R I T S

# Making Your Martini Ecofriendly

BY JACK BETTRIDGE

When the term “organic” was first bandied about widely in the late 1960s, the environment was suddenly a hot topic. The pollution solution meant not only not being a litterbug, but also farming without synthetic chemicals. But the chief proponents—read: hippies—weren’t important contributors to the nation’s breadbasket, so organic was slow to hit the mainstream. That something as hopelessly square as a dry Martini could be ecofriendly seemed implausible.

Fast-forward four decades. Martinis are hip again, and enough suitable gins and vodkas, as well as olives, exist to make such a cocktail organic—that is, if you make it supremely dry by holding the vermouth. Not only that, the ecofriendly selection now available is broad enough to outfit a small bar, with organic rum, tequila, Scotch and even limoncello and açai berry spirits filling out one of the country’s fastest-growing drink categories.

It’s no surprise, since ecological concerns have now taken root. Yet the tree-hugger ethos still centers on the edible or, when it comes to organic potables, on wine. Visit Walter Stewart’s Market in New Canaan, Conn., and you’ll find dozens of vegetables labeled organic. At the grocer’s adjacent liquor store there’s an entire section devoted to organic wines. If your tastes run to spirits, however, your choices drop to a handful of vodkas and gins mixed in with the rest. John Robinson, the manager, explains that while plenty of customers enter his shop intent on buying organic wine, he has few calls for such spirits. “I don’t think consumers know that organic spirits exist yet,” says Allison Evanow of Square One Organic Spirits, which makes straight and cucumber vodkas, along with a rye-based, fruit- and herb-infused spirit called Botanical. “They look for specific brands.”

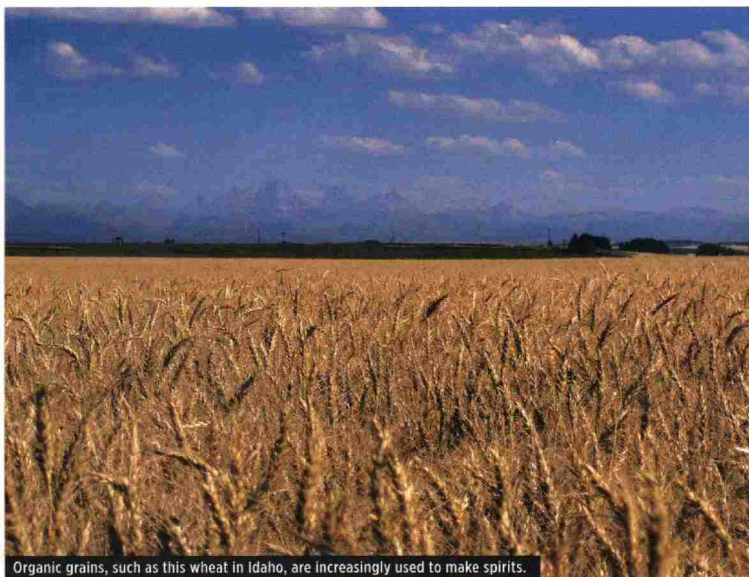
## Sustainability is the future

But Gray Orlley, the owner of Distilled Resources, an Idaho company that makes the base spirit for most of the organic brands available, foresees a time when whole shelves will be dedicated to organic liquors. He may be right. While the vast majority of his production is still nonorganic, sales of organic spirits have boomed since he began distilling them in 2000. Demand has doubled in each of the past two years, and he predicts it will quadruple in 2011. Among the organic spirits he produces are TRU, Square One, **Blue Ice** Organic Wheat vodkas and Veev Açai Berry Spirit, of which the latter three are completely made and packaged at his distillery. Nevertheless, he doesn’t attribute burgeoning sales to a taste advantage, but rather to social consciousness. “It’s not that organic tastes better. It appeals because it supports sustainability.”

Which I think in the case of clear liquor really has to be the point—in most cases—if you’re to shell out the extra couple of bucks it costs. Organic spirits are mainly defined by the use of raw grains that haven’t been exposed to synthetic fertilizers or pesticides. While you can make a case that the taste of fresh produce is improved through methods that let nature shine through, by the time a vodka has been distilled multiple

times to as high as 190 proof, you’re not tasting much of the field.

Many of the creators of organic spirits were led to the craft by what Melkon Khosrovian of Los Angeles’ TRU Organic Spirits calls “the come to Jesus moment.” His company, Modern Spirits, had been a boutique—but not organic—producer for six years when, in 2008, the staff looked at the company’s environmental impact and said, “This isn’t who we are, why the hell are we making liquor like this?” Two months later they were marketing organic vodka and phasing out their



Organic grains, such as this wheat in Idaho, are increasingly used to make spirits.

previous lines. Now TRU has two flavored vodkas and a gin, and its dedication to the environment extends to biodegradable labels, lightweight packaging (for less impact while shipping) and a program to plant a tree for every bottle sold (for carbon neutrality).

Evanow, based in California’s Marin County, says that place was a large influence on the company’s path. Not only was Marin “a hotbed of all things organic,” but bartenders were also making a point of using fresh ingredients. A more natural spirit seemed a logical match. Both she and Khosrovian tout the importance of quality ingredients—fresh fruits and vegetables—in their flavored products, and I think this is where organics may make their mark. When you begin adding botanicals or fruits to make gin or flavored vodkas, the strictures of organic certification force a huge improvement over those made with cheap additives. Of course, using quality ingredients that are not organic will have much the same effect.

The anomaly of organic spirits is that the first one—Rain vodka—backed into the category. What’s more, it was produced by the relatively behemoth Buffalo Trace. In 1996, it used a still designed for light whiskey to make vodka from superior grains. Harlen Wheatley, then a supervisor, now master distiller, sourced the corn of Fizzle Flat Farms, in Illinois, which just happened to be organic. It wasn’t until 2002 that the vodka was certified as such or the label mentioned it. Now it’s a hit.

In the organic-spirits world, everything comes in what Evanow calls baby steps. Which inspires hope that even an inveterate whiskey drinker like me will someday be able to go totally earth-friendly.

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