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## People for the Ethical Treatment of Vodka

It's official: the organic movement has infiltrated our bars. But whether or not your martini is made from organic, kosher, locally-sourced vodka, it still isn't "healthy" for you.

Nothing about the sleek blue bar and \$13 cocktails at Maui's Monkeypod Kitchen screams back-to-nature—the décor is *Mixology*-chic, not *Green Acres*, and you can't even see the beach from the landlocked café. But its menu is dedicated to locally sourced ingredients and sustainability, and bartender Robbie Valenzuela shakes and muddles drinks with organic vodka distilled on the island, one of the details he says his farm-to-table customers demand. "People want to know where it comes from, a crop you can see when you drive by," he says.

Less than an hour away, visitors can wend up the slopes of Haleakala Volcano to the solar-powered Ocean Vodka Organic Farm and Distillery and tramp past clumps of diving board-high sugar cane poles to admire the intoxicating panoramic view. With Mom manning a gleaming bottling line in an urban minimalist's dream kitchen, the family-owned facility—a big barn, really—can seem charming and rural, just like founder Shay Smith. He gives informal tours dressed a bit like a dairy farmer and pours samples of the world's only vodka distilled from sugar cane and ocean water from a reclaimed wood slab atop two tree stumps in his field. Despite the "aw shucks" surroundings, there's plenty of proof at this distillery that he's a businessman.

Although Ocean Vodka's been around for more than half a decade, Smith opened the farm over a year ago as a marketing tool. After visitors pay \$10 to ogle the 60-foot column still tower where his cane mash passes through 100 plates until it's stripped of nearly everything, they can pinch some basil or lavender from the newly planted Martini Garden to mash into his vodka, which he sells in the gift shop, just to the left of the picnic tables, alongside \$9 mugs and \$25 T-shirts.

Despite the tourist trappings, Smith's operation does everything from seed to glass, harvesting the cane by hand to preserve the soil by not burning it off. His website even highlights his ties to conservation organizations.

Welcome to the era of drinking responsibly, *very* responsibly, one in which your cocktail's origins and byproducts seem as important as its palatability. Now, distilled spirits labeled "organic" are crowding onto bar shelves in a movement even many of its crafters admit is a matter of marketing to meet demand.

Some say it reflects the natural progression of Millennials' taste buds: First

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beer and

wine, now they're chomping up to the bar for their "healthy" hard booze.

Called everything from grass-to-bottle, farm-to-cocktail, even field-to-glass, distilled spirits are the fastest growing segment of the organic beverage market (which includes beer and wine), with sales rising over 26 percent in the past two consecutive years: \$14 million for 2013 according to the Organic Trade Association. While it may seem these liquors are "extra pure" by virtue of their certifications, the sobering truth may be that they're less about wholesome ingredients flowing over drinkers' tongues, and more about the word "organic."

Less than 10 years ago, when states started mowing down liquor laws that had been in effect since Prohibition, a crop of craft distilleries began offering tours, tastings, and selling booze on site for the first time this century. Now, a number of these spirit makers are wading into organics, especially vodka, the simplest to make, in processes that follow the same rules as organic produce.

To be labeled organic, ingredients must meet certain production standards laid out by the USDA: no pesticides is the most well known and important of these rules. Equipment doesn't have to be made of soy milk paper or biodegradable materials, but it does need to be cleaned with organic supplies, and there can't be cross-contamination with non-organic ingredients during production.

In addition to being alchemists in the test kitchens, producers must also be stewards of the land. That means preserving natural resources during all phases of production: They source locally, going to great lengths to shorten distances when acquiring ingredients.

Unlike with wine, the taste distinction between organic and non-organic spirits isn't always clear. "I can tell the difference between canned organic tomatoes and regular, but in the distillate world, it's next to impossible to

detect,” says Tim McDonald, who judges the San Francisco World Spirits Competition, and says the idea of tasting organic in spirits is a bit of an oxymoron, as the purest distilled spirits, by definition, have no taste.

That’s why many of the producers infuse their vodkas with botanicals and other natural essences, betting on the trend toward “green” lifestyle choices, while admitting liquor-as-a-health-beverage is a bit, well, hard to swallow.

“This is one of those things in life we all love that in moderation are fine, not quote unquote good for you,” acknowledges Allison Evanow, a pioneer in the field who began distilling her Square One organic vodkas in 2006. “It’s more about flavor that doesn’t taste like a Jolly Rancher candy,” she says of her organic infused offerings that include basil and cucumber vodkas, in contrast to less-naturally derived ingredients.

“Inside it’s about the flavor and aroma, outside, it’s about who we are as people,” Melkon Khosrovian, owner of L.A.’s Greenbar Craft Distillery, adds regarding that other aspect of the movement: treating the environment with respect. In his case, the field-to-glass movement should have “and back to field, again” tacked onto the end. He plants a tree in Central America for every bottle of Tru spirits he sells to offset the carbon produced in manufacturing. “When someone has a cocktail that person becomes carbon neutral,” he laughs.

He eschews acid-etched bottles and labels with metallic-based inks. Such attention to detail abounds among the organic distillers. They use bamboo-derived labels, not paper, and their production byproducts and packaging are bleach-free or recycled as feed for organic dairy farms. It’s precious P.C.—and great P.R.

Yet, industry insiders warn there are insincere players that simply slap the organic label on products that are grown and bottled elsewhere, implying small-batch craftsmanship, but in reality, just concocting a myth and trucking it in.

Given the dazzling array of bottles behind the bartender, it may be surprising to learn all spirits boil down to the same few ingredients: fermented and distilled grains (except brandy, which is made from fruit). Gin is a distilled grain flavored with Juniper berries. Whiskey is one aged in charred barrels. Even the words vodka and whiskey are derived from the same word: “water” in Slavic and Gaelic, respectively.

As for gluten-free claims, even distillers who make bourbon from gluten-free grains such as corn and millet are skeptics of the idea that spirits are distinctly “gluten-free.”

“Scientifically, they are all gluten-free,” says Sonat Birnecker, who left the lectern—she was a professor—to start Koval organic distillery with her husband in Chicago in 2008. “We’ve had people seek us out because of whiskey made from 100-percent millet, but at the top of the line with advanced still equipment, the government knows there is no gluten in it,” she adds of most other distilled spirits.

Maybe it's because a lot of these places are the first of their kind since the Roaring '20s, but much of the tasting room décor tends to Al Capone speakeasy. But these juice joints are perfectly legal, and a few, like Koval's and Journeyman Distillery, about an hour and a half outside Chicago, are even kosher.

Since certification distinctions can be a bit muddled, some take this extra step. Birnecker says kosher certification adds a guarantee that ingredients are pure. "They know nothing in it comes from bugs," she says. (Although insects are, technically, part of nature, using their bodies for food coloring, which is common, apparently isn't kosher.)

In Three Oaks, Michigan, Bill Welter's Journeyman Distillery makes giggle water in, appropriately enough, a former featherbone factory (used for corsets). But today's constraints concern production standards and ingredients that he believes produce a higher quality grain. "We're also helping to support what are typically smaller farms," he says.

That was the reason Esteban McMahan, the so-called Spirit Guide at one of the only organic and local distilleries in the South, 2-year-old TOPO, in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, opened to use grains grown just 93 miles away. 99.8 percent of their award-winning gins (that are 100 percent organic) are sourced locally (the Juniper berries are imported from Europe, but in a couple of years, McMahan hopes local Juniper plants will bear enough fruit to be used).

McMahan's customers are the generation weaned on Whole Foods and fed organically. "Those kids are starting to be of legal drinking age," McMahan says of once-fussy eaters who he hopes remain picky drinkers, too. "They started with organic sodas, then beer and wine, now they are moving on to hard liquor."

Well, for now, until the spirit moves them to try the next trend.



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