

Will Organic Vodka Save the Planet?

BEPPi CROSARIOL / Globe and Mail

(April 16, 2008) — Worried about pesticides in the food chain? Concerned about your carbon footprint? Just pondering the planet's fate is enough to drive some of us to drink.

Fortunately, that's one activity we don't have to feel so guilty about any more. The latest cocktail craze? Ethical booze.

It started with Rain organic vodka, which landed in B.C. stores two years ago, and Juniper Green Organic London Dry Gin from England, available in British Columbia, Ontario and Alberta.

Next week, about 90 LCBO stores in Ontario will roll out a pair of virtuous vodkas, Square One Organic and 360, both from the United States. The latter, while not organic, is made in high-efficiency stills and packaged in recycled-glass bottles with a "post-consumer, waste-paper" label.

They join another unusual product, Utkins Fairtrade Premium Single Estate Rum, made from sugar cane grown by 800 small-farm holders guaranteed a fair market price for their produce.

Nova Scotia is also embracing the high-minded-hooch movement. Instead of getting wasted away, enlightened Jimmy Buffett fans can bartend their way to a better planet with margaritas based on 4 Copas organic tequila (also available in Alberta). It's all enough to give new meaning to the familiar liquor-ad caveat, "Please drink responsibly."

While organic wines have been available for decades, distillers have been slow to jump on the pesticide- and fungicide-free bandwagon. A big reason is that the wine industry is still dominated by small producers, many of whom have made personal choices not to work with chemicals.

In contrast, the spirits world is dominated by multinationals, which tend to rely on vast swaths of factory-farmed grains such as wheat, corn and rye. It's difficult, and expensive, to supply their needs with organic grain.

But the emergence of small, boutique distilleries has altered the landscape. So has the growing obsession among vodka consumers in particular for not a single molecule of foreign matter that could possibly add flavour to their prized blend of water and alcohol.

As vodka makers started one-upping each other, distilling their products over and over to achieve supposedly greater purity (and thus, apparently, no afterburn), Allison Evanow, a former North American marketing manager with Jose Cuervo tequila who started her own vodka company, took the logic to its limit.

"I just thought, if it were so darned pure, wouldn't it be organic?" Ms. Evanow said. The founder and chief executive officer of Square One Organic Spirits in Novato, Calif., makes her two-year-old brand at a certified-organic facility in Idaho from organic rye grown in North Dakota.

She also uses a natural fermentation process, eschewing non-organic enzymes normally used to break down proteins and fibres in the rye, a tough grain she believes is superior for vodka production but more challenging to ferment than the more popular corn and wheat.

"We lose 50 per cent of our yield in fermentation because we can't use aggressive processing aids," Ms. Evanow said. "And it does actually impact the flavour. It doesn't have the so-called bite of the Old World rye style. It's lighter and sweeter."

For what it's worth, I found Square One to be nicely balanced, with an attractively floral, almost fabric-softener note to it (but then I love the shaving-cream blast of a classic, juniper-heavy gin, too).

Ms. Evanow says she's not concerned about appealing to the mass market. Several of her best clients are what she describes as "Iron Chef" accounts, referring to restaurateurs who have competed on the Food Network series Iron Chef America. These include Tom Douglas of Seattle and Mario Batali, whose high-end Los Angeles pizzeria, Mozza, for some reason sells more Square One vodka than any of Ms. Evanow's other clients. Pizza with vodka? Either that's a Hollywood starlet's idea of a good wine pairing or I'm out of the loop on some new southern California diet.

Liquor's embrace of organics might be seen as the latest step in alcohol's virtuous makeover. No longer a pariah akin to tobacco, booze has sailed on a gust of positive publicity ever since the early 1990s, when a *60 Minutes* episode suggested the French suffer less heart disease because they drink red wine.

Not long after, liquor producers seized on the Zone diet craze with the boast that many spirits happen to be carbohydrate-free.

Then, a year ago, lovers of fruit-based cocktails received a new excuse to drink when researchers at the U.S. Department of Agriculture in conjunction with counterparts in Thailand reported that the antioxidant qualities of certain berries were amplified by adding alcohol.

But alcohol has its drawbacks, and there's just as much of it in organic spirits. So, don't expect the new brands to win endorsements from the Canadian Liver Foundation.

And don't expect pesticide-free vodka to cure booze-related headaches. Ian Finkelstein, director of the Toronto Headache and Pain Clinic, said there's no conclusive evidence that such pain is caused by impurities in the beverage or other substances commonly found in alcoholic drinks, including alcohol itself. And, he adds, it all depends on the individual.

"I think the verdict is still out in the medical community," Dr. Finkelstein said. "I think if people want to drink it because they want to avoid the impurities, then that should be enough."

There is, in fact, an argument to be made that as far as consumer wellbeing is concerned, the difference between organic and non-organic wines is a far more meaningful one. That's because distilling burns off virtually all impurities. (Think about it: It's why science and engineering labs use distilled water rather than tap.)

Can high-minded hooch nevertheless save the planet from a toxic hangover? It's nice to see spirit makers do their part, however humble, to reduce the amount of chemicals leaching into soils and groundwater.

Square One, like 360 vodka, is also trying to limit its greenhouse-gas emissions in creative ways. The square-sided bottle, for example, fits neatly into an exceptionally compact, six-bottle carton, which has such a small footprint it falls outside the LCBO's shipping specifications, Ms. Evanow said. (An exception was made to handle the product.)

But the big factor driving the ethical-ethanol movement is marketing. It's an appealing sales hook especially for vodka, a segment in which flavour differences between brands could hardly be more subtle. The spirit is in fact defined under federal law as colourless and absent distinctive aromas or flavours.

Strong brand identity also is the reason these new, supposedly Earth-friendly spirits don't go all the way and adopt lightweight cardboard Tetra Paks. Most come in fetching, heavy-glass decanters worthy of a Birks display.

"The vodka category is an image category," Ms. Evanow conceded, adding that she nevertheless uses degradable soy inks and chose to forgo frosted glass, which would have required a toxic acid treatment.

Virtuous vodkas

360 VODKA

Quadruple distilled in Missouri and filtered five times. Made from local grains using an energy-efficient process and bottled in 85-per-cent recycled glass. Starts off with an aggressive kick, then smoothens out with a decidedly grain-like flavour. The vodka for tree-hugging Scotch lovers. Rustic bottle with a waste-paper label and swing-top closure, evoking your Pa's moonshine decanter (well, my Italian Papa's, anyway). \$44.95 in Ontario (available April 23 in select stores).

SQUARE ONE ORGANIC VODKA

Distilled in Idaho from organic rye grain grown in North Dakota. The fermentation process uses all-natural enzymes and yeasts for a softer grain flavour. Faintly sweet and smooth with a dry finish and fresh-floral note reminiscent of fabric softener (in a good way). Quite nice. Big, heavy bottle with (what else?) square sides. \$44.95 in Ontario (available April 23 in select stores).

RAIN VODKA

Made in Kentucky by luxury-bourbon firm Buffalo Trace from organic white corn. Distilled a whopping seven times, presumably for A-type personalities who like to wash their hands a lot. The only gold-medal winner in the super premium vodka category of the 2004 World Beverage Championships. Very fresh, with grassy-mossy notes. Fetching raindrop-shaped bottle. "You'd think that in Vancouver we see enough rain, but fortunately people seem to have an affinity for it," said John Pilley, B.C. sales manager for The Bacchus Group Inc., the

brand's local agent. \$41.99 in British Columbia.

ROBERTO CAVALLI VODKA

Okay, so it's neither organic nor eco-friendly. But it's the new "it" vodka that actually delivers on flavour. From the Italian fashion designer known for jewellery bearing serpentine imagery (and now for a trompe-l'oeil frosted vodka bottle seemingly pinched in the middle by a coiling snake), this spirit is more than a fashion statement. Distilled in Italy from grains grown in the Alps, it's round and creamy, a luxurious, cuddly, teddy bear of a spirit, with notes of fresh herbs (especially mint), nuts and spice. Brilliantly balanced. \$87.40 in Ontario.

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