

# Why Isn't There More Organic Alcohol?

BY BRIDGET SHIRVELL



INTERNS FROM THE LAND INSTITUTE HARVESTING KERNZA® IN KANSAS / PHOTO BY AMY KUMLER

While consumer appetites for organic food, clothing and other products have grown exponentially since 2005, less than 1% of commercial spirits, beer and wine is certified organic, according to Nielsen data. Why? Because grains, the foundations of many beers and spirits, are rarely produced this way. In fact, the USDA reports that certified organic grain is a small fraction of the overall amount produced in the U.S.

But throughout the last two decades, a grassroots group of farmers, bakers and brewers has worked to expand organic grain production. Their efforts could benefit the beer and spirits markets as well as the environment.





A FARMER STANDING NEXT TO THE MASSIVE ROOTS OF KERNZA® (L) AND HARVESTED GRAINS (R) / PHOTO BY JIM RICHARDSON / PHOTO COURTESY OF THE LAND INSTITUTE

Vital to farm ecosystems, grains help maintain healthy soils and sequester carbon dioxide into the ground, which promotes plant growth. In 2013, the clothing retailer Patagonia partnered with The Land Institute, an organization that works to develop alternative agriculture. The two started training farmers in Kansas, Montana, Illinois and New York to grow Kernza® perennial grain. Being a perennial grain means that it continues to regrow and absorb carbon from the air after each harvest.

To help finance the operation, Patagonia partnered with Hopworks Urban Brewery in Portland, Oregon to create the first commercially available beers made with organically grown Kernza. The results were Long Root Pale Ale, an American Pale Ale, and Long Root Wit, a Belgian-style witbier brewed with orange and coriander.

“It’s rewarding to see a crop you put effort into wind up on the retail market,” says Erik Engellant of Square Butte Farms, which grows Kernza for Patagonia.



LONG ROOT PALE ALE / PHOTO BY AMY KUMLER

Organic grains have also made their way into vodka.

Kristen Risk, cofounder of Frankly Organic Vodka in Texas, never considered producing anything other than organic spirits. But she struggled to find USDA-certified organic corn.

“We had a thirst to craft a vodka that was free from genetically modified seeds and synthetic pesticides, fertilizers and herbicides,” says Risk. “Frankly, we believe fruits, roots and botanicals taste more robust in their natural form.”

Risk says she conducted extensive research on the spirits industry before she created Frankly Organic Vodka. She bet that consumers would be willing to pay for an organic spirit that was transparent about its ingredients.





KRISTEN RISK, COFOUNDER OF FRANKLY ORGANIC VODKA, STRUGGLED TO FIND USDA-CERTIFIED ORGANIC CORN / PHOTO COURTESY OF FRANKLY ORGANIC VODKA

“Often, folks don’t associate a cocktail with the environment, but all it takes is education and awareness.” says Risk. “Organic farming and sustainable agriculture practices contribute to a positive environmental footprint, and both consumers and retailers are responding to our organic vodkas as we continue to witness increased sales and distribution.”

While organic farming may have environmental benefits, there are also some drawbacks. For example, it’s a common misconception that organic farming uses no pesticides. While most of the pesticides used are naturally based, there are still health and environmental concerns. Just how much of a benefit that organic farming poses is still inconclusive.

Also, to become “certified organic” isn’t feasible for many farmers.



TAKING A SAMPLE AT HARDSHORE DISTILLING COMPANY / PHOTO COURTESY HARDSHORE DISTILLING

The USDA requires farmers to follow organic standards for three years before they can be certified. During that time, farmers can't market themselves as organic but they have to pay the certification fees, which include visits from the USDA or USDA-accredited certification agent, paperwork and more.

Jordan Milne, the founder of Hardshore Distilling Company in Maine, didn't pursue organic certification for his family farm because they use an inorganic herbicide to help yield more grain. He believes this helps the farmers save fuel, as they don't need to take as many passes with the tractor to weed.

"I grew up there," says Milne. "And I have seen with my own eyes and back what careful stewards they are of the land. And how carefully they consider each practice and input they employ in the production of some of the absolute best grains and produce possible."





HARDSHORE DISTILLING COMPANY DOESN'T USE ORGANIC GRAIN BUT THEY USE GRAINS FROM THE FOUNDER'S FAMILY FARM / PHOTO COURTESY OF HARDSHORE DISTILLING COMPANY

However, that means that the farm can't be certified organic, nor can Hardshore's products.

"Whether or not your grain is organic, it is grown using tractors and harvesters and transported with trucks," says Milne. "We continue to stay abreast of the latest in grain-production methods and practices, and like all things related to our gin, we are constantly looking to improve our quality while lightening our footprint on our planet."

Milne suggests that consumers purchase spirits from the people who make it. That way, they can better understand their production processes.

While there's no simple solution, as the climate crisis intensifies, the food and beverages we choose to consume can make a difference, and brands are listening. Ten years ago, organic grain production in the U.S. was 0.1% acreage. Now, it's about 0.5%. Change is underfoot.



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