



Let's talk ORGANIC

Awakened Old Fashioned



The appeal and the "real" of organic spirits.

BY ELYSE GLICKMAN

The craft cocktail movement and the fresh produce boom are still going strong after more than a decade—separately and together. This naturally dovetails into bartenders and customers demanding more variety and better quality spirits to choose from.

The word "organic," when used correctly and certified by the USDA, means the spirit has passed stringent requirements to earn the designation. If bar management takes the time to source produce from local (and, often, organic) farmers or grow the herbs in house, doesn't it make sense to have organic spirits available to ensure customers are

ordering the best cocktail possible?

"The availability of organic spirits has blossomed from obscure and esoteric brands to well-known brands going organic and embracing an ingredient-forward and eco-aware mentality," says Ben Carpenter, Beverage Director at Balboa Bay Resort, whose other accomplishments include his own bitters company and an all-California menu that supports local farmers, and spirits producers and his A&O Kitchen + Bar. "I think the biggest improvement has been the number of distilleries involved in creating organic spirits. Years ago, Crop Vodka was one of the few companies that brought organic spirits

Photo: KOVAL Distillery



ORGANIC INGREDIENTS ADD A LAYER OF FRESHNESS THAT CAN'T BE MIMICKED WITH ARTIFICIAL INGREDIENTS.



IN DISTILLATION, THE WAY 'ORGANIC' HAS AFFECTED THE PROCESS IS MAINLY THROUGH THE SOURCING OF INGREDIENTS THAT ARE FREE OF HARMFUL CHEMICALS, GLUTEN, AND GMOS.



ALL OF THE INGREDIENTS (SUCH AS GRAIN) SOURCED FOR A USDA-CERTIFIED ORGANIC PRODUCT MUST PASS CERTAIN REQUIREMENTS.

to the marketplace. These days, a slew of distilleries have taken up the cause and produced a multitude of organic base spirits including whiskey, rum, vodka, tequila, and gin. I love that we're in a place now that you can create a full organic cocktail menu out of the array of options in the market."

Oh, My Goodness!

"Organic products are in high demand in response to the decades of overly processed foods we, as a society, have been consuming," says Natalie Bovis, an award-winning bartender, author, and Co-Creator of Om Liqueurs.

When Bovis came onboard with Om Liqueurs, she was already seeing organic foods going from niche to mainstream.

"As people started to care more about a robust longevity, they began to consider what goes into their cocktail," says Bovis. "The emphasis on freshly juiced citrus, herbs, and market-fresh ingredients in craft cocktails set the scene for organic products to make their way into the bar. Today, the term 'organic' translates to high quality and catches the eye or ear of a bar manager."

When Sonat Birnecker Hart Co-Founded Koval Spirits in Chicago with her husband Robert, the goal was to create organic spirits using artisanal techniques as it would give the couple an opportunity to support sustainable agriculture, local farmers, and as a result, wind up with a superior product from both a philosophical and flavor standpoint. More than a decade later, the demand for their product is a selling point in its own right.

"We have maintained our focus on organic from the moment we started and have not changed our marketing all that much," she says. "We have noticed, however, that there is more interest for our products because of being organic than when we first got started almost eleven years ago."

"We also know that it is more than a trend because our farmers are planting more fields with organic crops than ever before, and we have seen a growing interest around the world for our organic spirits from Chicago to Tokyo."

Olli Hietalahti, Founder of Tom of Finland Organic Vodka, feels that a

quality product like his organic vodka has crossover appeal.

"With the appeal of nature, we are targeting what we call 'enlightened consumers,' which not only includes the LGBTQ community, but also art lovers, people interested in organic dietary choices, and generally those of liberal beliefs," says Hietalahti. "An organic product along these lines support the brand values and image. Furthermore, we have seen the interest in organic products and healthier lifestyles peak in all product categories—including spirits—worldwide."

The Organic Advantage

Newport Beach has long been considered one of the most health-conscious towns, and this is a prime reason why Carpenter says integrating organic spirits into the Balboa Bay Resort beverage program has been a seamless process and an easy sell.

"Giving these products prime placement on our cocktail menus has made them back bar ready," says Carpenter. "Furthermore, we have taken an extra step in building our 'California Distilled' program from 100% California-made spirits as well as cordials and bitters from local producers. When you're putting that level of effort into each cocktail, every ingredient receives a great deal of scrutiny from our bar staff."

When Carpenter and his team taste new organic spirits from vendors, the process begins with building a cocktail on the spot and seeing how it plays with citrus, bitter spirits, and cordials. If the mouthfeel is thin or the finish is short, it will likely not stand up to other artisanal ingredients in the recipe.

Jacob Migliaccio, General Manager of Calo Kitchen + Tequila in El Segundo, California, observes that the demand for organic spirits at the restaurant has created such a buzz that guests are requesting specific tequilas be integrated into their margarita of choice from the menu. "It is so much fun to see the guests try new spirits and to educate them with the history and story behind each spirit," he says. "Our bartenders really understand our method of creating a well-rounded cocktail and that starts with preparation. We spend a lot of time each day preparing our fruit



Hotel California

**½ oz Humboldt Distillery
Organic Spiced Rum**
**½ oz Malahat Cabernet
Barrel Rum**
**½ oz St. George
Bruto Americano**
**½ oz Organic cinnamon
cordial**
½ oz Lime Juice
**2 dashes Housemade
organic ginger bitters**
**Float of Jardesa
Red Aperiva**

Pour all ingredients except float and bitters into a Boston shaker. Shake and strain the drink into a tall or rocks glass. Finish cocktail with float and bitters, and add fresh mint and edible flowers.

Ben Carpenter, Beverage Director,
Balboa Bay Resort

and base mix so our guests can enjoy a quality drink with each visit."

Kevin Zadayan, Owner of Te'Kila Restaurants in Hollywood and Sherman Oaks, California, meanwhile, has noticed that there's definitely a stronger perceived value towards organic spirits, allowing cocktails and bars to command a higher price tag alongside the perception of being ingredient-conscious and more eco-aware.

"Any bartender who is fully invested in their craft will always gravitate towards the best possible ingredient," says Zadayan. "In the case of a base spirit, arguably the most important flavor-imparting ingredient in a drink, the better the quality and attention to detail, the better. Freshness and taste is all that matters to them, and organic ingredients add a layer of freshness that can't be mimicked with artificial ingredients."

The Pursuit of the Big "O"

When a new trend ascends and peaks, "caveat emptor" is not just a starting point for a consumer but also a bar manager or director making the decisions catering to

those customers. The bar's main decisionmaker should always ask if the product is USDA-certified. All of the ingredients (such as grain) sourced for a USDA-certified organic product must pass certain requirements. If they have that certification on the bottle, it has gone through a relatively rigorous check. If it doesn't have the certification, it probably isn't truly organic.

"There are many certifying agencies, but it is important that it has the USDA certification and other verification because that insures that the entire supply chain is organic," she says. "At Koval, we have to undergo an inspection every year that requires that we can trace every bottle back to all of its ingredients, and those ingredients must all be certified organic. There is traceability involved as well as having organic materials used in the process. All of the suppliers, not just the distiller, must have up-to-date organic certificates. This ensures that no one in the supply chain has a lapsed certificate or is not organic."

Aside from USDA certification, look for companies who embrace organic in

ingredients and in the way they operate. "In OM Organic Mixology Liqueur's case, we share that we start with a 'gluten-free' sugarcane-based spirit, sweeten with organic agave nectar, and use all-natural flavorings and colorings derived from fruits and vegetables," says Bovis. "For example, we use fair trade chocolate suppliers in our OM Dark Chocolate & Sea Salt Liqueur. We also sponsor yoga for bartenders at various events throughout the year. In short, we walk the talk—we aren't just hopping on a bandwagon."

Bovis also recommends asking how the liquid is produced. It's usually a good sign if a vendor can enumerate the distilling and crafting process right off the cuff, and stage trade events that tie into the beverage's appeal and concept.

Above all, the story behind the brand is important. "The best bet is to look beyond the label and understand the producers and their motivations," says Zadayan. "Organic doesn't necessarily mean better, and vice versa, so seeking out producers who care about their results and their consumers is the ultimate badge of honor. I always ask about the owners or the


BEHIND THE BAR: ORGANIC

family behind the production. What is their goal? Why organic? What's the motivation? This usually gives me a formative glimpse into the mindset [of who] created the products that my customers will be experiencing."

Migliaccio, meanwhile, asks if the company distilled it themselves or if it is more of a marketing company sourcing

a distillate and packaging it with a host of buzzwords that catch the eye of the consumer. As there are many spirits competing for limited spots in bars, a vetting process is required to pinpoint the brands that live up to the standards and need a space on the bar menu.

"Organic certification doesn't have novelty value any more. There needs to

be a deeper brand-related meaning, as opposed to just slapping the organic label on the bottle," says Hietalahti. "The real questions should be, 'Is it any good?' and, 'What is the liquid like?' In distillation, the way 'organic' has affected the process is mainly through the sourcing of ingredients that are free of harmful chemicals, gluten, and GMOs." 

Tom's Pickle

1 oz Tom of Finland Organic Vodka
1/3 oz St.-Germain Liqueur
2/3 oz Chablis (or other dry, fairly acidic white wine)
1 teaspoon Honey vinegar
2 dashes Orange bitters

Pour all ingredients into an iced mixing glass. Stir carefully until well chilled. Strain the drink into a Nick & Nora glass. Garnish with miniature pickle or a thin slice of lemon peel.

Olli Hietalahti, Founder of Tom of Finland Organic Vodka

Casa Noble Signature Margarita

1 1/2 oz Casa Noble Organic Tequila Blanco
1 oz Fresh lime juice
1/2 oz Organic agave nectar
1/2 oz Triple sec

Combine ingredients in a shaker with ice, and shake until chilled. Strain into a salt-rimmed glass (if the client requests it) over fresh ice. Garnish with a lime wedge or other fresh citrus.

Kevin Zadayan, Owner, Te'Kila Restaurant

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2 oz KOVAL Bourbon
1 oz KOVAL Coffee Liqueur Gin
1/2 oz simple syrup
2 dashes Chocolate bitters

Pour ingredients over ice and stir until chilled. Strain into rocks glass with one large cube of ice.

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