

# YourLife

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# LIFT YOUR GLASS

Beer, wine, and spirits options abound

By Jessica Strelitz for USA TODAY

**D**rinking with the Earth in mind is easier than ever for green-conscious consumers. Ground-to-glass spirits distilled from organic grains, biodynamic wines, and earth-friendly beers can be found across the country, in stores and online. Some companies in particular are pulling ahead of the pack to lead the charge.

Chris Weld of Berkshire Mountain Distillery uses fresh apples and sweet spring water from his 70-acre Massachusetts farm as part of the production process for rum, bourbon, and gin.

"We are very conscious of products we make and we don't put anything bad into a bottle," said Weld. The distillery's waste stream is near zero due to the local sourcing and other measures such as composting by-products and using

the packaging that his bottles come in on the farm for weed control.

Stanford-educated environmental engineer Scott Leopold was working in wastewater engineering before he turned his professional efforts to Colorado small-batch distillery Leopold Bros. He developed a distilling system that produces a fraction of the wastewater of typical methods, and utilizes chilly Denver water to cool the mash for its spirits—a process that his brother Todd says is easier on the distillate and yields a mellower product.

Oregon's Organic Nation is one of a growing number of domestic microdistilleries that offers spirits made with organic grains and herbs. Organic Nation's gin, infused with 12 certified-organic botanicals, is light on juniper and rich with black pepper, cucumber, coriander, and orange zest. Every aspect of the

business's operations is local, from its rye to its graphic designer. CEO Diane C. Paulson says the company is exploring partnerships with area chocolate makers and coffee roasters to develop a line of flavored spirits.

The craft distilling market is less than 1 percent of the overall spirits market in the U.S., which remains dominated by global brands. But small distilleries can now be found from Maine to New Mexico.

"We let the spirits speak for themselves," Berkshire Mountain's Weld said. "The key thing is to have a wonderful product. Once customers taste it, they convert."



At Oregon's Cooper Mountain Vineyards, winemaker Gilles de Domingo is focused on soil. He sets up the building blocks of an uber-

# FOODDRINK

green environment by introducing biological elements to help the vines grow more resistant and planting flowers to create a more harmonious ecosystem. Consequently, the wines he coaxes along strongly reflect the unique and varied land where the grapes are grown, or the terroir.

"By doing less, we create a more vibrant, more alive wine," says Domingo of the farm's certified organic and biodynamic practices. Biodynamic farming is focused on up syncing up with natural cycles, from pruning to harvest.

A similar philosophy guides the winemaking at family-owned Frey Vineyards in Mendocino County, Calif. Solar energy is used for Frey's bottling line and electric forklifts move pallets of wine made with no added sulfites.

At Concannon Vineyard, located 45 minutes outside of San Francisco, three types of groundcover attract insects, hawks and owls provide natural pest management, and this winter a flock of sheep were brought in for zero-emission mowing.

At the heart of the certified-sustainable operation are Concannon's Conservancy wines, four varietals grown on land that has been protected from urban encroachment in the rapidly developing region.

But not all eco-friendly wine

comes in bottles.

Jenny Lefcourt was inspired to give much-maligned box wine a better name after spending time in France, where box packaging is common among small vintners looking to save money on bottling, labeling, and shipping.

Lefcourt teamed with two French biodynamic producers to bring a red blend and white to the domestic box market via an initiative called From The Tank. The lightweight packaging holds the equivalent of four bottles of wine, which remains good to drink for a month after the vacuum-sealed pouch is opened. And the taste? In several blind taste tests with wine specialists, Lefcourt says no one has been able to discern bottled wine from boxed.

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Canned beer has a long history in the U.S. But for microbrewers, the container has more than nostalgic value, even if getting craft beer drinkers excited about the packaging is tough.

21st Amendment Brewery in San Francisco and New York-based Butternuts Beer & Ale, maker of the cult beer Porkslap, were both drawn to cans in part because of the container's portability. "You can take cans into

places you often can't bring bottles, such as outdoor venues, parks, and music festivals," says 21st Amendment's Shaun O'Sullivan.

But the can is also eco-friendly. Can aficionados have worked hard to educate customers about aluminum's benefits in recent years.

Both brewers report being able to fit up to 120 cases of canned beer on a pallet, compared to about 70 cases of bottled product, which greatly contributes to lessening their carbon footprints.

In addition, canned beer isn't exposed to UV light, so it doesn't suffer from the same degradation as bottled beer after sitting on store shelves. And customers who once complained of a metallic taste from the aluminum need not fear—with food grade coatings, the brews never come into contact with the metal. Colorado-based Oskar Blues Brewery produced the first domestic craft beers in a can eight years ago and now offers five year-round beers and one seasonal brew in a can. Marketing director Chad Melis says the team is proud of what it started.

"We've been stomping our feet and yelling about the benefits for years. We're just glad to hear people are beginning to hear the message," says Mellis. ■

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