



Wine, Beer and Spirits - Common Questions and Answers

Organic wine, beers and spirits are becoming increasingly popular and are now widely available in supermarkets, off licenses and from wine merchants. But what is organic alcohol all about? What makes it organic?

Wine

Strictly speaking it is the grapes that are organic, not the wine itself. This is why you will see labels that read 'wine made from organically grown grapes'.

How are organic grapes grown?

Organic grapes are produced using organic farming methods, this means working with nature to ensure that the plants are really healthy and that pests are kept in check as far as possible by natural predators. The farm must be inspected to the Soil Association's standards in order for the wine to carry our logo.

Organic farmers encourage a living soil, which ensures that the plants are really healthy. Farmers use natural fertilisers such as compost, manure and particular plants with particular fertilising qualities, to ensure that the soil is full of all of the nutrients that the crops need to be healthy and the soil life that helps to deliver these nutrients to the crops.

Vineyards have to go through a three year conversion process before the first organic grapes are harvested. Legumes are often planted between the avenues of vines to provide fertility.

Pest and weed control

Organic farmers use natural systems to prevent pest or disease problems becoming serious. A range of practices prevents them from having to resort to pesticides.

The main methods of pest control are; crop rotations, encouraging natural predators, providing conditions that encourage plant health and vitality, selecting suitable varieties, alongside various planting techniques and mechanical weeding methods.

Occasionally the system is unable to cope with a particular pest problem, this may be as a result of unusual weather conditions that particularly favour a certain pest or disease. If this happens there are some carefully selected pesticides that can be used. These have all been assessed for their impact on human health, the environment and wildlife. We do not allow the use of any herbicides, because the other practices should always be sufficient to deal with weed problems.

Sulphur and copper could be used as a fungicide in an organic vineyard. Under the Soil Association's standards copper can only be used if the farmer has got permission from Soil Association Certification Ltd to do so, and even then no more than 8kg per hectare can be used per year. This maximum amount of copper is being further reduced to just 6kg per hectare per year at the beginning of 2006.

Mildew diseases can be a problem for vines, these are kept at bay by allowing a good flow of air around the vine shoots.

What about Sulphur?

A key difference between organic and non-organic wine is the amount of sulphur added to it. Sulphur dioxide is allowed during vinification to prevent the wine turning to vinegar, but the amount that can be used is limited under organic rules. On average organic producers use just one quarter of the legal maximum for conventional wines.

Under EU regulation 1493/1999, the total sulphur dioxide (SO₂) content of conventional wines, other than sparkling wines and liqueur wines, on their release to the market for direct human consumption, may not exceed:

- (a) 160 milligrams per litre for red wines; and
- (b) 210 milligrams per litre for white and rose wines.

However for some non-organic dessert wines the permitted levels are as high as 400mg/kg.

Under the Soil Association's organic standards, the following levels must not be exceeded:

Product	Total sulphur dioxide permitted (milligrams per litre)	Amount of "free" sulphur dioxide permitted as part of the total milligrams per litre allowance
Red	90	25
White/rose/cider	100	30
Sparkling	100	10
Dessert	250	70
Bag in box	155	55

The Soil Association's standards for sulphur dioxide content are even stricter than some other organic certification bodies.

As in all organic production and processing no GMOs are permitted in the production or processing of organic wine.

How do you identify organic wine?

'Organic' is a term defined by law and all organic food production and processing is governed by strict standards. A vineyard must be certified by a recognised body such as the Soil Association. Current European Union legislation covers the growing of grapes, but not the processing of wine. This means that standards under which wine is processed may vary across the EU, as individual certification bodies set their own standards.

As the processing of the wine is not covered by EU legislation, all 'organic wines' sold in the EU must be labelled as 'Wine made from organically grown grapes' and not 'organic wine'. Look for the symbol of a recognised certification body on the label.

What about the quality and cost?

There are an increasing number of excellent organic wines. However the quality can vary as much as for non-organic wines. Organic certification covers the production and processing methods but not the quality of the wine. Most organic wine producers are smallholders with limited quantities of wine available for sale each year. Many organic wine producers do not have the resources to keep wine for long periods, so often, red wines are sold young and improve with storing after purchase.

Organic wine is now widely available at a wide range of prices. Cheaper organic wines do usually cost a little more than equivalent conventional wines, but in the case of champagne and other usually more expensive wines, the price is often the same. The increased premium is due to a more labour intensive method of farming and lower yields. But the result is often higher quality grapes and wines of a cleaner, natural flavour.

Are organic wines suitable for vegetarians and vegans?

Conventional wines and beers may be 'fined' with isinglass (fish swim bladders) or egg white (albumen) for fining. Fining is the process which clears yeast cells, grape particles and any other cloudiness from wine to make it clear. Most organic producers use bentonite clay to fine their wines, but egg white and isinglass are also permitted under Soil Association standards. At present there is no legislation requiring the labelling of ingredients and processing aids in alcoholic drinks. If the wine is suitable for vegetarians as well as being organic, then you may find that this is identified on the label along with the organic mark.

Beer

Organic beer is made from organic malt and hops using organic growing methods. These farming methods work with rather than against nature. The average conventional farmer is estimated to spray hops up to 14 times each year with an average of 15 pesticide products¹.

For Soil Association certified beers justification has to be provided for the use of burtonisation. This is a process whereby skilled brewers modify the mineral content of specific ions in their water. It involves the addition of mineral salts like calcium sulphate (gypsum), calcium chloride, calcium carbonate (chalk), to create a water appropriate to the style of beer being brewed.

Organic spirits

While not so widely available as organic wine, organic spirits are available through specialist suppliers and some supermarkets. The main difference lies in the use of organic raw materials. Conventional vodka is made from grain produced in systems usually reliant upon multiple applications of pesticides and artificial fertilisers.

Where can I buy organic wine, beer and spirits?

You will find information on where you can buy a wide range of organic products including wine, beer and spirits, in the Organic Directory. You can buy a copy by calling T: 0117 914 2446 or access it online at W: www.whyorganic.org

How can I support the work of the Soil Association?

The Soil Association is a membership charity, we urgently need your support to continue our work. As public support for the Soil Association continues to grow, our ability to influence the thinking and policies of government and big business grows with it. In this way we help to develop a truly healthy and sustainable future. Join us today and help us to continue campaigning for sustainable agriculture and organic food. You can join the Soil Association on our website, over the phone or by writing to us.

1. Sustain Report - Bitter Harvest, Bitter Beer - The impact of beer production and consumption on people and the environment 1999- www.sustainweb.org

Further Reading

Biodynamic Wines - Monty Waldin

Please see the Soil Association website library, <http://www.soilassociation.org/library>, for more information

Soil Association Campaigning for organic food and farming and sustainable forestry

Bristol House, 40-56 Victoria Street, Bristol BS1 6BY

T: 0117 929 0661 F: 0117 925 2504 E: info@soilassociation.org

www.soilassociation.org

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