

SPIRITS BRANDS WORK TO REDUCE THEIR FOOTPRINT

Sustainability has risen to the top of the agenda for the spirits industry, but it's a broad issue which requires action in many areas. *Joe Bates* investigates

Sustainability has arguably become the hottest topic for the spirits industry, cutting across categories and markets, as well as dominating the annual reports and social media feeds of giant multinationals and boutique craft distilleries alike.

Brands are keen to chart the progress they have made in becoming more environmentally friendly, but sustainability is a broad concept. It covers everything from the sourcing of raw materials and production processes, to transport and packaging, as well as the treatment of local workers and their communities.

Signing up to environmental standards and awards

Meeting standards set by respected international environmental associations is one way for spirits producers to cut through the noise and show their efforts. For instance, Spanish wine and spirits supplier Zamora Group recently joined the United Nations Global Compact in Spain.

Zamora Group CEO Emilio Restoy says: "It is the largest initiative in the world in terms of sustainable development, and means you have to work to its Ten Principles while continuously learning to progress in business sustainability – the



Rémy Cointreau-owned The Botanist Gin has achieved B Corp status for its commitment to the environment

UN Global Compact enhances actions taken in regards to sustainability in a very visible way, and allows for sharing of good practices which generates synergies that add value to a company."

The Compact's Ten Principles cover four key issues: the environment, labour, human rights and anti-corruption. Environmental achievements made by Zamora include the sustainable design and production of a new plant in Cartagena, Spain, for its flagship Licor 43 liqueur, while 70% of the energy the company uses comes from sustainable sources. Three-

quarters of its waste is reusable and the company supports local communities by purchasing local ingredients, such as Sorrento lemons and Navarrese sloes.

Islay-based The Botanist Gin, owned by Rémy Cointreau, has opted to achieve B Corp status, an internationally recognised third-party award given to companies for their commitment to the environment and society. The Botanist Gin brand ambassador Abi Clephane says: "Achieving our B Corp status was a validation of how we have grown as a distillery and now we are looking at how we can improve on this. We have taken steps in the journey, such as a circulatory water system to turn our waste water into heating for the visitor centre, offices and bottling hall, and we have switched to 100% renewable energy sourced within the UK."

Leading the move to organic practices and products

Organic food and drink has long been touted as being better for the environment, having lower emissions, using less energy and being less polluting. The A. de Fussigny Cognac house has sold its A. de Fussigny VSOP Pure Organic expression since 1998 and was one of the first in the Cognac »



Zamora Group CEO Emilio Restoy. Zamora recently joined the United Nations Global Compact in Spain

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» industry to do so. “Today, we are one of the biggest sellers of an organic Cognac reference,” says export and sales manager Laura Moore. “However, this represents less than 1% of our total sales. We want to progress and be a motor for change. Currently, it is not possible to convert our standard range to organic since too few winegrowers in the Cognac region practise organic agriculture.

“We have therefore developed a two-pronged approach: firstly, purchase increasing amounts of available organic Cognac eaux-de-vie to incite the market to produce more; secondly, sign contracts directly with winegrowers and help them transition to an organic agriculture. We will gradually integrate organic eaux-de-vie in all of our standard products. Our idea is that by signing contracts for supply and purchasing these organic eaux-de-vie available, we will force the propagation of organic agriculture in Cognac.”

Organic spirits have “really taken off” in the US in the last five years, according to Virginia-based Square One Organic Spirits. The company was a pioneer of organic spirits in the US, launching the country’s first certified organic vodka in 2006. Founder and CEO Allison Evanow puts the success of organic down to the “fact that consumers understand that being organic is not just about not having pesticides in your food and drink, but about staying true to the flavour profile of something natural versus lab-created flavours, as well as the fact that organic farming is simply better for both

the farmers working in the fields and the land itself”.

Evanow describes Square One, which now produces a variety of naturally flavoured organic vodkas, mixers and RTDs, as a brand that is “beyond organic”. She says: “We could have simply sourced all organic ingredients and left it at that and said that the liquid was more sustainable than other spirits and it would have been true. But we have tried to incorporate ‘greener’ decisions into every aspect of our company, although we still have some packaging components and other things that could be improved upon.

“For me, sustainability is a goal to achieve through the product life cycle, so from the farm, to the production, to the packaging, to the materials you use to market your product, etc. Our distillery partner sourced 25% of their energy from wind power and there is a wind farm about five miles from the distillery. We purposely designed our glass bottle – a high-energy-use product – to have removable labels and an attractive design, so that people would repurpose the bottle, not just recycle it.”

Balancing growth with ethical and biodiverse practices

Mezcal is set to be one of the hottest spirits categories in the US this year, but the Mexican spirit’s phenomenal growth has repercussions for the environment, according to Deano Moncrieffe, European brand ambassador for The Lost Explorer Mezcal, which launched in late 2020 in Mexico, California and the UK. “The larger drinks companies that are acquiring land and production rights from small producers need to understand the moral obligations that they have in supporting these communities moving forward,” he says.

“As demand increases, there are so many small family-run producers who have been making agave spirits for many years that are losing land that has been in their families for generations. It’s important that these big acquisitions are replaced with partnerships rather than outright ownership otherwise the marginalisation of smaller family-led producers will continue and generations of traditional and unique mezcal-making techniques and flavour profiles will inevitably disappear.”



The Lost Explorer Mezcal is produced at a palanque with ‘a host’ of sustainable practices

Moncrieffe says there are “a host” of sustainable practices in place at the palanque where The Lost Explorer is produced by award-winning *maestro mezcalero* Don Fortino Ramos and his daughter Xitlali. They include the repurposing of agave waste into fertiliser and planting three agave plants for every one harvested. “We’re starting to put ambitious biodiversity initiatives in place too, such as germinating seeds of genetically diverse agave, and have purchased land close to the palenque to help scale our replanting programme,” Moncrieffe adds.

Rum production traditionally has a high environmental impact due to the land required to grow the sugarcane, the fuel necessary to convert the raw sugarcane into a fermentable medium and the amount of water used in production. Change is afoot, however. Last year, Bacardi unveiled a biodegradable bottle, while the waste water used to make Diageo’s Australian rum brand Bundaberg is treated and then used to irrigate local sugarcane crops.

Belize-based Copalli is leading the way in terms of sustainability in the rum industry, according to Mark Breene, CEO of Copalli Spirits. “The Copalli distillery was designed to be organic, sustainable and have a neutral carbon footprint,” he explains. “Our production system is a closed loop. We only use three ingredients: sugarcane juice, yeast and rainwater. The sugarcane is grown organically within two miles of the distillery and is harvested by hand. After the juice is pressed out of the cane, the remaining cane fibre – called *bagasse* – is dried and burned as fuel to heat the stills.

“As the juice is heated in the stills, the alcohol vapors rise and are collected and later blended with rainwater captured »



Square One produces a variety of naturally flavoured organic vodkas, mixers and RTDs

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Green closures a significant step to sustainability



Belize-based Copalli aims to lead the way in terms of sustainability in the rum category

» from the canopy of the Southern Belize rainforest. The remaining juice, which contains no alcohol, is called *vinasse*. That is collected, allowed to cool and mixed with the ash from the fires used to heat the stills to and spread on the sugarcane fields as fertiliser. It is a completely regenerative process; nothing is allowed to leach into local streams.”

The flurry of sustainability announcements from major brands and multinationals like Johnnie Walker, Bacardi and Beam Suntory this year might give the impression that every spirits producer has joined the green revolution. Of course, that is not the case however, but Square One’s Evanow says it’s never too late to begin. “Don’t be afraid to take baby steps. Sometimes there is a fear that if you aren’t perfect, consumers will call you out on it and so sometimes I think brands don’t want to take the extra step because they know some part of their product or production or marketing isn’t that sustainable.

“But even if you choose labels made from post-consumer waste materials or non-tree raw materials, for example, that is a step in the right direction. It’s OK to start small and imperfect, but keep challenging your vendors to help you find greener ways to do things and then, when it becomes feasible for you, adopt them and keep improving.” ●

Spirits producers can take a small, but significant, step forward to improve the sustainability of their packaging by choosing cork-based closures, believes Amorim Top Series global sales and marketing director Hugo Mesquita.

With around 97% to 98% of the 35bn to 40bn spirits bottles manufactured globally each year sealed with aluminium or non-refillable closures, Mesquita believes there is a “massive opportunity” for the Portuguese cork stopper manufacturer to expand its market share and help spirits firms meet sustainability targets.

According to Mesquita, interest in the company’s sustainable spirits solutions is at an all-time high. He notes that Amorim’s raw ingredients for its Top Series cork closures are Forest Stewardship Certified (FSC); cork is also 100% sustainable, recyclable and renewable. In addition, Portugal’s cork forests have been identified as natural carbon sinks, making cork closures an ideal way for spirits producers to help offset their carbon emissions.

The sustainable closure choices Amorim offers includes the Wood Tops range, which combines a natural wood top with a cork shank and is fully biodegradable. Demand for Wood Tops has grown hugely in recent years, leading Amorim to acquire two companies that produce wood tops — Swedish company Elfverson and Portuguese firm Biocape — to help it develop this sector of its business.

Another option for spirits producers is the new RE-Cork range, billed as a substitute for plastic tops. The RE-Cork capsule is made with 30% to 50% of agglomerated cork and either a bio-based or recycled polymer, offering a biodegradable or recyclable choice of closure. Amorim also offers 100% cork stoppers for spirits made from a single cork plank, including a line for white

Amorim’s Wood Tops range is being expanded



Tapì’s Mekano the ‘first bar top with a lock’

spirits designed not to taint the colour or flavour of the spirit.

International closures group Tapì also prides itself on the sustainability of its closures for the spirits sector. “In recent years, we have adopted the 3R ethos towards sustainability,” says a company spokesperson. “This concept of green thinking is founded on three key words — reduce, reuse and recycle. From this we have defined new best practices, new technologies, new production processes and a new range of products that stand out for their strong links with environmentally friendly components.”

A good example of this strategy is the NEOS line of closures made from polymers derived from renewable sources. The NEOS line maintains the same level of product performance and aesthetic appeal as closures made from petroleum-based sources, the spokesperson notes.

“Alongside NEOS, there is Abor and T-Cask,” the spokesperson adds. “Both of these ground-breaking production methods allow us to harvest waste from the distillation process and end-of-life maturation barrels. These materials are then mixed with naturally sourced polymers — NEOS — to create eco-friendly closures that equally become key elements in storytelling about the product, relating details about origin and the product’s region.”

Other green closures offered by Tapì include Duo, a bar top designed for the spirits and cosmetics sector. “It is unique as no adhesive is used in its assembly or for its components. The head and leg are actually quite easy to separate, enabling easy recycling by the end consumer.”

“Lastly, we have Mekano,” says the spokesperson, referring to a product described as the ‘first bar top with a lock’. “The cutting-edge closure invented by Tapì Revò is a multi-use closure — a bottle sealed by Mekano can be used again as a container once the contents have been consumed, making Mekano a completely recyclable closure.”