

# What Does ‘Sustainable Spirits’ Mean? These Distillers Have an Answer

BY KARA NEWMAN



ECO-SPIRITS. / PHOTO BY: JOEL GOLDBERG / PROPS BY: PAIGE HICKS

Can your next cocktail help support the environment? Possibly. A growing number of spirits are made with sustainable efforts in mind.

However, “sustainability” remains a nebulous term. Spirits aren’t regulated the same way as food or agriculture, even though they’re made from the same crops, making it more important than ever to understand how distilleries are working to make a difference.

“Sustainability is a funny word that means different things to different people,” says Dragos Axinte, founder and CEO of Novo Fogo. “It’s a mentality, a philosophy, not a place you’re going to get.”

Since there's no official "eco-friendly" designation, it's up to consumers to take a thoughtful look at which bottles they choose. However, as Shana Farrell writes in [A Good Drink: In Pursuit of Sustainable Spirits](#), "If you care about whether your eggs are free-range or your strawberries are organic, you should also care about where your drink came from."

Here's a look at four spirits aiming to help the environment.



GOOD VODKA. / PHOTO BY: JOEL GOLDBERG / PROPS BY: PAIGE HICKS

## Good Vodka

Distilled from surplus coffee fruit sourced in [Colombia](#), this vodka is designed to reduce waste and support farms.

The idea was born after Tristan Willey, cofounder, and bartender, visited a coffee farm. Ripe coffee cherries were harvested and dried to extract the prized coffee bean. The fruit left behind, called cascara, was discarded as waste. He and Cofounder Mark Byrne realized the sugar-rich fruit could be distilled into alcohol.

The fruit pulp, discarded in rivers and lakes, had become an environmental issue. Farmers didn't have funds to deal with the waste, nor to pay government fines related to the water pollution. Instead, Willey and Byrne worked with the [Colombian Coffee Federation](#) to create a process for purchasing the fruit from the farmers and distilling it into vodka.

“We’re diverting a waste product and making it something that becomes a source of income for farmers,” says Byrne.

But distilling it into vodka wasn’t enough; they also wanted the process to be carbon negative. By diverting the discarded fruit from rivers and lakes, where it would turn into methane, they save about 15.76 kilograms of carbon dioxide emissions per bottle, according to Byrne, so the vodka is not just carbon neutral, but carbon negative.

Using a byproduct of the coffee-making process, the vodka also doesn’t involve additional farming or irrigation of fields.

It also makes a flavorful vodka: rich, rounded spirit with a distinctly fruity character.

“We want it to be something you can use, and feel good about using,” says Willey.

## **Arbikie Highland Rye 1794**

Consider swapping a dram of traditional Scotch made with malted barley for an estate-made Scottish rye whiskey. This rye was grown, mashed, distilled and bottled on a family-owned farm in Arbroath, on the east coast of Scotland.

“It happened quite naturally,” says Alex Forsyth, Arbikie’s U.S. brand manager. “We have all these crops in our hands, so we saw the vision to not just create the world’s most sustainable distillery, but set off a new category of sustainable spirits.”

While the distillery is just seven years old, the farm itself dates back 400 years.

Potatoes are the core crop, primarily sold to supermarkets. The distillery’s first efforts focused on turning the misshapen “wonky” potatoes into vodka and gin.

Master Distiller Kirsty Black also makes Nàdar (Gaelic for “nature”). The carbon-negative gin and vodka are distilled from peas grown without synthetic fertilizer, meaning it saves more carbon emissions than it produces, giving it a carbon footprint of -1.54kg per bottle. Spent grains are used as animal feed.

“Nothing goes to waste,” says Forsyth. The whiskey is not carbon negative. But it’s a single-site product: crops and field locations are called out on the label to encourage traceability. Distillation, aging, bottling and labeling is done on site. (The American oak barrels used to age the whiskey obviously are sourced elsewhere.)

Building a whiskey “from the ground up” also yields a better product, says Forsyth.

“We’re not just doing this to say that we’re sustainable,” he insists. He likens the field-to-bottle approach of making spirits to how Michelin starred chefs prepare a meal: “You’d never expect them to nip out to the supermarket and buy a premade sauce. The flavor you get from making something from scratch is just on another level.”



ARBIKIE HIGHLAND RYE 1794, NOVO FOGO CACHAÇA, PROCERA GIN. / PHOTO BY: JOEL GOLDBERG / PROPS BY: PAIGE HICKS

## Novo Fogo Cachaça

Novo Fogo describes its bright, grassy cachaça, made from fresh-pressed sugarcane, as “rum’s older Brazilian cousin.” It’s also a spirit with a mission: In the heart of Brazil’s coastal rainforest, Novo Fogo centers its environmental efforts around trees, specifically reforestation efforts.

More than 300 species of native Brazilian trees are threatened today, says Axinte, including many used in making barrels for aging cachaça.

“In Brazil, it’s a very fragile environment,” says Axinte. “Everything we do, we have to do through the filter of, *Can we do this in a less negative way?*”

That decision-making process has resulted in myriad initiatives, such as planting fruit trees to entice insect-eating birds, so pesticides become unnecessary; using recyclable glass and renewable woods for barrels; even recycling the vapor created during distillation to heat the still to make the next batch of cachaça.

But Novo Fogo is focusing its environmental efforts on the trees. The company created what it calls “a rehab center for threatened species of native trees” on its Brazilian property. Working with forestry expert Dr. Sylvia Ziller, the company identified 36 endangered species. Botanists collect seeds from those species in the rainforest. The seeds are grown in a local nursery, then planted on the distillery’s property, as well as partner properties around the area.

Why go to all this trouble? It's about protecting the environment and the community, Axinte says, but it's also about the terroir that provides to the cachaça.

"There's absolutely a quality to the spirit that comes from the place," says Axinte. "I don't think it could be replicated elsewhere."

## Procera Gin

Even gins made with local grains typically use juniper berries harvested afar, often from Europe, dried and transported thousands of miles to distilleries around the world. But Procera is made with African juniper, a species called *Juniperus procera*, hence the name of the gin.

Because the berries are harvested just about 43 miles from the distillery in Nairobi, the gin can be made with fresh juniper.

"We're the first company to use African juniper," says Guy Brennan, Procera's founder. "Fresh products are better. We believe fresh products also are better when used in distillation."

The 10 African botanicals that flavor the earthy, savory gin include orange, acacia honey from Somalia, pepperlike spice Grains of Selim from Sierra Leone, and cardamom and mace from Zanzibar. The bottles are handblown in Nairobi using recycled glass and capped with a hand-carved palm wood stopper.

But it's the juniper that's part of Procera's core mission. The company partners with Kijabe Forest Trust, an organization that works to protect Kenya's Kijabe Forest from poachers. In turn, the Trust works with local communities to collect the sun-ripened juniper. The signal that they're sweet enough to harvest: when local baboons start devouring the small berries.

In addition to showcasing Africa's terroir, the company has a sustainability mission.

"For every bottle we sell, we plant a juniper tree," says Brennan.

To date, more than 10,000 bottles have been sold, the company says, sustaining the forest and the communities that use those juniper trees.

"I believe firmly that by doing the right thing, you produce better products," says Brennan.

## How to Avoid Greenwashing

It's easy to fall into the trap of greenwashing, or marketing language that overstates a company's positive impact on the environment. To make better informed decisions, spirits pros advise taking the following steps:

- Beware of vague or meaningless words, like “green,” “clean” or “natural.”
- Seek transparency. “When a brand uses phrases like ‘grown sustainably’ or even just ‘estate grown’ but won’t back them up with details (how? which estate?), that’s a big red flag for me,” says Good Vodka’s Byrne.
- Check for certification. There’s no single entity that verifies sustainability in spirits, but some stamps of approval can shine a light on priorities, from organic (no added chemicals) to Fair Trade (supports fair labor practices and less damaging production methods) to B Corp (considers community and environment in making decisions). “Any certification is a good thing,” says Novo Fogo’s Axinte. “Any time you have a third party come to look at your business, you’re trying harder.”



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