

# Try uncorking organic wines for your holiday parties

BY TERRENCE BELFORD, FOR CANWEST NEWS SERVICE



Certified wines made from organically grown grapes use fewer chemicals in winemaking. Green grapes hang on the vine in an organic vineyard in an Ontario winery in this August 3, 2007 file photo.

**Photograph by:** Glenn Lowson ,

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What is the perfect drink to go along with that organic free-range chicken you are planning for dinner? How about a certified organic chardonnay?

Certified organic wines are now not only available in great diversity, but they're quickly rising in popularity, say the men and women who make and sell them.

At the Liquor Control Board of Ontario, Canada's largest vendor of spirits and wines, Shari Mogk-Edwards, vice-president of merchandising, says her stores carry about 100 different organic wines and have 10,000 cases on hand -- six of them in the \$13-or-less price range.

In Calgary, Geoff Last says he stocks about 50 different certified organic wines in his store, Bin 905 Distinctive Wines & Spirits.

"Organic wines are definitely catching on among consumers," he says. "I would guess demand might be rising in the 10 per cent to 15 per cent a year range."

Nor is the organic wine business solely in the hands of small boutique-style wineries. In Hopland, Calif., the heart of the Mendocino wine country, Bonterra Vineyards has 1,200 acres devoted to growing 25 varieties of organic grapes and last year shipped 292,000 cases of 11 different wines to about 20 countries, says winemaker Bob Blue.

"It is a really fast-growing market," Blue says. "What is driving it is a rising concern about putting all those chemicals like pesticides and fertilizers used in traditional grape growing into your body."

"Certified organic wines rely on natural forms of agriculture and use far fewer chemicals in the winemaking process."

Canadian certified organic wineries are fewer in number -- only about half a dozen coast to coast. They are also much smaller, and their annual output is generally not enough to attract the attention of giant merchandisers like the LCBO.

In Ontario, for example, Frogpond Farm Winery in Niagara-on-the-Lake, is the province's only certified organic winery to date, and its total output this year will be just 4,200 cases, 80 per cent of which will be sold at the winery's own retail store, says founder Jens Gemmrich.

In British Columbia there are three certified organic wineries to date, and one of them, Forbidden Fruit Winery in Cawston, only makes wines from tree fruits. Rollingdale Winery in West Kelowna is more typical, but its output of certified organic wines is only about 1,000 cases a year, says owner Steve Dale.

"Organic winemaking is just starting to catch on in Canada," says Last. "In other countries like France, however, winemakers have been doing it for years. Many turned to it when they found decades of over-fertilization had left the vineyard soil sterile of nutrients.

"Returning to organic grape-growing was the only way to restore vitality to the soil."

Before rushing out to lay down a case of organic wine, however, one should understand "certified organic" does not mean the wine is completely free of chemicals. Winemaking comes in two parts -- the growing of the grapes and then the turning of those grapes into a drinkable product.

The growing part is indeed free of artificial aids such as pesticides and fertilizers. In this country, the Canada Food Inspection Agency now sets the standards, and independent inspectors carry out the certifications.

"It can be a bit confusing because there is lots of competing third-party certification agents who do the accrediting," says Rochelle Eisen, a farm and winery examiner for the Certified Organic Associations of B.C. "And you need to certify not just the farming methods but the winemaking as well."

The fact is some chemicals are vital to the winemaking process. Sulphur dioxide is one. It helps with the barrel aging and preserves quality in shipment. Certified organic wines are allowed up to 100 parts per million versus about 350 in traditional winemaking.

"I know of only one winery that does not use sulphur, and that is in the south of France," says Last. "The problem is that while it makes great wines, I am told every third bottle in a case is pretty terrible."

While demand is growing among consumers, there is a challenge facing producers. The cost of growing organic grapes is higher, but the prices charged for the wine has to be competitive with non-organic wines.

"People will pay double price for an organic tomato, but they won't pay a premium for organic wines," says Gemmrich.

"The bulk of what we stock has to be at or below the \$12.70-to-\$12.90 range," says the LCBO's Mogk-Edwards. The LCBO has six certified organic wines in that range -- none from Canada.

The LCBO does have special vintage sections in some stores, says Tom Wilson, vice-president of Vintages, and Canadian producers might find a home at the provincial liquor retailer.

"Right now we are looking at adding special new organic wine sections in every store with enough space and demand for them," he says. "We definitely believe organic wines are starting to come into their own."

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