



IMAGE COURTESY OF PELICAN PUB & BREWERY

ORGANIC QUAFFING

Sales of organic brews are skyrocketing By Jessica Hirst

You want to do your part to help the environment, but the thought of global warming stresses you out. Luckily, organic brews offer the perfect solution: While quaffing a tasty microbrew, you can support sustainability and take your mind off the prospect of rising sea levels at the same time.

This weekend gives you an opportunity to easily do good by heading up to Portland's Overlook Park for the North American Organic Brewers Festival (NAOBF). The event will feature more than 40 breweries serving up over 75 organic craft beers. Many of the breweries are local to the Northwest, but others hail from such faraway lands as Belgium and Scotland. Some breweries will pour favorite and reserve beers, and a few have brewed special beers for the event.

NAOBF organizers strive to make the festival as sustainable as possible, says Abram Goldman-Armstrong, a co-organizer of the festival. Beer is served in compostable glasses made from cornstarch, vendors use compostable plates and cutlery, recycling stations abound and the festival's electricity is produced using biodiesel and solar generators.

The variety of beer styles you'll find at the festival — including crisp lagers, spicy saisons and good old Northwest IPAs — attests to just how far organic beer has come in the past decade.

NAOBF was started in 2003 by Craig Nicholls, who is now the co-owner of Portland's Roots Brewing Company, the first certified organic brewery in Oregon. The event has doubled in size each year since it started, says Goldman-Armstrong. "We started the festival to get more breweries to try brewing organic, because there weren't that many people doing it back then," he says. "It was a niche within a niche."

But these days, the organic star has risen over the beer industry. Organic beer sales in the U.S. skyrocketed from \$9 million in 2003 to \$25 million in 2006, according to the Organic Trade Association.

The trend probably has little to do with a taste for any particular "organic flavor." Unlike organic vegetables, which some people say taste better, organic beer doesn't necessarily have a

different flavor, says Goldman-Armstrong. "You're really not going to notice a difference," he says.

Yet the quality and flavor of organic beer has evolved over the past seven or eight years due to better availability of organic raw ingredients. "In the past, you could only brew certain styles of beer organically, but now that's changing and you can brew whatever you want," says Goldman-Armstrong. "Now there are lots of great beers out there that just happen to be organic," says Jack Harris, owner and brewer at Fort George Brewery and Public House in Astoria.

As far as organic beer has come, a few kinks still need to be worked out — especially when it comes to hops. Because hops are prone to pests and a disease called powdery mildew, they're difficult to grow without pesticides. As a result, organic hops are pricey and only available in certain varieties. For example, it's difficult for local brewers to find organic hops of the variety used in Northwest-style IPAs, says Goldman-Armstrong. Because hops are used in such small quantities when making beer, the USDA allows breweries to call beer organic that doesn't use organic hops. All of the brews served at NAOBF will contain organic malt, which is the primary ingredient in beer, but they won't necessarily have been made with organic hops.

But that's only one wrinkle in the process. "Our motivation is sustainability," says Goldman-Armstrong. "We want to leave something for the next generation. Agricultural chemicals are damaging to salmon, songbird populations, farm workers and the whole ecosystem," he says. "Organic beer is really just the starting point. At the festival, the beer is central, but it's also a building block for something larger."

Here's a sampling of several Oregon breweries that will be serving up brews at NAOBF:

Fort George Brewery and Public House

www.fortgeorgebrewery.com

Fort George is a mid-sized brewery tucked into the misty, maritime town of Astoria. Owner and brewer Jack Harris says that the brewery's overriding philosophy is to use as many local ingredients as possible. "We're not extreme

locavores, but we put a lot of value into doing what we can locally," he says.

The brewery's Spruce Budd Ale, which will be featured at NAOBF, is made using spruce buds gathered near Astoria by the brewers themselves. "We go tromping around in the woods to get them," says Harris. He describes the beer as a perfect summer ale, with a spruce aroma and a citrus flavor.

Pelican Pub & Brewery

www.pelicanbrewery.com

After Pelican Head Brewer Darron Welch graduated from high school many years ago, he spent some time in Germany. "When I left the U.S., I thought I liked beer," he says. "But I was wrong. I loved beer — it just had to be great beer." Located in Pacific City, Pelican is known for its high-quality ales, which consistently win awards.

Welch says that Pelican began using organic malt in its beer for the first time in 2003 so that it could participate in NAOBF. At this year's festival, the brewery will feature its organic Belgian-style Heiferweizen, which Welch says has a crisp but mellow flavor and a smooth, dry finish.

Upright Brewing Company

leftbankproject.com

Upright is so new that it just brewed its first batch of beer in March of this year, and it doesn't yet have a tasting room. Brewer Alex Ganum says that his beers, which he refers to as Belgian farmhouse ales, aren't brewed to any particular style. "We're borrowing from the philosophy of farmhouse brewing from Belgium, focusing on using local products," he says. "Rather than following a historical standard in our recipes, we just use ingredients that look good and look fresh."

Upright will be featuring two beers at NAOBF: Reggae Junkie Gruit and Seven. The hop-free Reggae Junkie beer is brewed with a combination of herbs and spices, such as orange peel, lemongrass and hyssop. Ganum says the Seven is a pale, strong beer with fruity, spicy flavors. "It's our most typical Belgian-tasting beer," he says.

Upright is located in the Left Bank Project building in Portland, and Ganum plans to open a tasting room there sometime in July. ■

The North American Organic Brewers Festival takes place June 26-28 in Overlook Park, Portland. www.naobf.org

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