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Joe Sixpack | Going organic: Will consumers hop on Busch's bandwagon?

YOU DON'T drink organic beer because it's healthier for you than conventional beer.

You drink it because it makes you feel better about your choices as just another depersonalized consumer in the world's mammoth industrialized food production chain, a system that devalues labor, rapes the environment and enriches multinational agriculture conglomerates.

Personally, anything with an adequate alcohol kick readjusts my outlook on the lumpen life, so I could live quite happily without ever wondering whether my beer contained genetically modified grains.

Still, as with all things involving my favorite pastime, I'm intrigued by what appears to be yet another emerging trend in the beer business. Which is another way of saying Anheuser-Busch - you heard it right - is test-marketing organic beer.

It's called **Wild Hop Lager**, available only in California. Even if it manages to come East, we're still talking about a micro-share of microbrewing, the proverbial drop in the bucket.

Yet A-B's move could be a huge boon to smaller organic brewers, who often must contend with inconsistent supplies of raw materials. Though the supply line is improving, there still aren't enough farmers willing to give up pesticides and fertilizers to produce enough grain for the consistently high-quality malts needed for production, experts say.

As Jon Cadoux, founder of Peak Organic Brewing in Burlington, Mass., noted, "If you're a farmer, why commit if there's no demand?"

But if America's dominant brewer is suddenly in the market for tons of organic raw materials, you can bet plenty more farmers will make the switch.

Said Max Oswald, director of sales and marketing at Wolavers Organic Ales in Middlebury, Vermont: "The tiniest effort by Anheuser-Busch will draw more attention to organic lifestyle than the rest of us could ever accomplish."

From a brewing standpoint, the biggest improvement might be in hops. Currently, though America is the world's No. 1 hop producer, none are grown organically.

"Hops are the biggest challenge," said Cadoux, "The problem is when one farmer in, say, Yakima Valley, Wash., decides to grow a few acres organically while all the other ones are using pesticides, that one farm becomes a target for all the pests.

"So what we need to do is pull together a huge chunk of land that is devoted to organic hops."

Most organic brewers get their hops from New Zealand, where only a handful of varieties are available. That's where some organic brewers take advantage of one of the odd loopholes in whole food rules. Under federal standards, just 95 percent of a product's ingredients need be organic to qualify for certification.

Though hops provide much of a beer's aroma and flavor, the flowers represent only a small fraction of the total ingredients.

So even if that beer you're enjoying says "organic," it might have been grown with chemical yummies, like copper oxychloride and simazine.

Though the ingredient loophole has no negative impact on flavor or health, it seems a contradiction of the strict regs that apply to the actual production of organic beer - things like cleaning regimens and storage.

For example, anti-foam emulsions that prevent spillage during boiling and fermentation are forbidden because they are synthetic. It doesn't matter that the agents are non-toxic, don't affect the taste and are used in infinitesimal quantities.

"We get overflows, which is a pain in the butt," said Cadoux. "It's a headache we have to put up with, but we believe in it."

And that's the essence of organic beer: It's what some believe in. Whether you'll go along with the trend is a matter of your own convictions.

Organic beer is far more popular on the West Coast, but more labels are beginning to show up here.

Peak Organic (made at Shipyard Brewing in Portland, Maine) makes three flavors: **Pale Ale**, **Nut Brown Ale** and **Amber Ale**. They'll be available in Philadelphia shortly.

Wolavers, which has been brewing for nine years, is widely available in three styles: **Pale Ale**, **Brown Ale** and **India Pale Ale**. **Oatmeal Stout** and Belgian-style **Wit** are packaged seasonally.

Also look for:

- **Cantillon Lambic Bio** (Belgium).
- **Joseph Spelt Ale** and **Sara Buckwheat Ale** from Brasserie de Silenrieux (Belgium).
- **Samuel Smith's Organically Produced Lager** (England).
- **Pinkus Organic Ur Pils** (Germany).

"Joe Sixpack" by Don Russell appears weekly in Big Fat Friday. Tune in tomorrow at 6 p.m. for "Joe Sixpack's Happy Hour" on WPHT (1210 AM). Send e-mail to joesixpack@phillynews.com.