



The Cornucopia Institute

Plant-based Beverage Scorecard Scoring Criteria

USDA Certified Organic

There are many certified organic options when it comes to plant-based beverages. Certified organic brands received 500 points. Brands that are “made with” organic ingredients received 300 points. Conventional brands received zero points.

Brand Commitment

Brand commitment to organics, as measured by the percentage of offerings a brand sells that are certified organic, is important because a brand that is wholly invested in the organic label has an incentive to maintain the integrity of the label. This is not merely a theoretical point – the organic marketplace is rife with certified products that exploit one loophole or another in order to reduce costs. Cornucopia’s scorecards are designed to help consumers identify products that adhere to the letter and spirit of the organic regulations.

The number of points awarded equals the percentage of products a brand sells that are certified organic, up to 100.

Ingredients

A hallmark of quality plant-based beverages is a very short list of ingredients. Additives such as preservatives, nutrients, colors, flavors, stabilizers, thickeners and so forth can be problematic in themselves, but also they can reflect a product that is low-quality, has been overly processed, is designed to sit on a store shelf for long periods of time, or is otherwise cheaply made.

Brands that use two ingredients or fewer receive 250 points.

Carrageenan

Research links carrageenan to gastrointestinal inflammation, including higher rates of colon cancer, in laboratory animals. Yet it is still found in many foods, including some certified organic foods. Brands that are carrageenan-free receive 300 points.

Flavors

As with colors, natural (non-organic) flavors are permitted in organic products, even though organic flavors are available and frequently used by the higher-quality brands. Plant-based beverages that do not include flavors receive the full 100 points. Brands that use organic flavors receive 50 points. Brands that use conventional flavors receive zero.

Sweetener

For the purposes of this scorecard, Cornucopia does not take a position on the myriad types of sweeteners found in plant-based beverages (cane sugar, honey, maple syrup, etc). We do however believe in the principle of transparency with regard to ingredients and ingredient labels. For this reason, we award plant-based beverages that state the type of sweetener used 100 points. Plant-based beverages that simply list “organic sugar,” which could come from a wide variety of agricultural products, receive zero points.

Amount of Sugar

This is a non-scoring criteria listed for informational purposes. It should be noted that just because a plant-based beverage is certified organic does not mean that it can't include an alarmingly high amount of sugar.

Preservatives

Preservatives of one kind or another are frequently found in plant-based beverages. Brands that avoid preservatives receive 100 points. Plant based beverages that use natural preservatives such as mixed tocopherols, malic acid, or ascorbic acid receive 50 points. Brands that use any other preservative receives zero points.

Thickeners/Gums

Thickeners/Gums includes all additives designed to thicken or stabilize the product. Plant-based beverages that use no thickeners or stabilizers receive 100 points. Those that use certified organic thickeners such as tapioca flour, locust bean gum, carob bean gum, gum acacia, or corn starch receive 50 points. Brands that use conventional thickeners receive zero points.

Non-GMO Project Verified or USDA Organic

Genetic engineering is banned in organics. Conventional products that carry the Non-GMO Project Verified label can also be trusted to not contain GMOs. Plant-based beverages that carries either label receives 100 points.

Lecithin

Lecithin is a common ingredient in processed foods and is most commonly derived from soy or sunflower. Unless it is organic, it is likely derived using harsh chemicals, such as hexane. Plant-based beverages that are lecithin-free received 100 points. Brands that use organic lecithin received 50 points. Those brands that used conventional lecithin received zero points.

Vegetable Oils

Vegetable oils are usually conventional (unless certified organic) and will likely contain GMOs and traces of pesticide residue. In addition, many vegetable oil additives contribute to an imbalanced level of omega-6 fatty acids in the diet. Plant-based beverages that do not contain added vegetable oil received 100 points. Brands that included certified organic oil received 20 points. Brands that included conventional oil received zero points.

Vitamin A Palmitate

This is an informational, non-scoring criteria for those who wish to avoid vitamin A palmitate