



Which is the most eco-friendly alcoholic drink?

Wine, beer or spirits: which has the biggest environmental impact? And would you pass on your favourite tippie if it was shown to damage the environment?

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Which alcoholic beverage is the most eco-friendly?

Tracey Tatty Yappa, via Facebook

After reading through the comments below, it seems we have a consensus view that cider has the least environmental impact of all the alcoholic drinks, and spirits the worst. This stance is largely based on the proposition that the most significant impact - in terms of energy use, at least - is caused by the manufacturing stage, as opposed to the packaging or transportation phase of a drink's lifecycle. I would agree with this argument in most cases, but it does seem there are some massive variables between the various types of alcoholic drinks.

For example, beer seems to get a fairly bad rap from readers because its production requires plenty of heating, cooling and water, not to forget the often agricultural intensive ingredients. There are some excellent inputs from ColdRiverBrewing and bobinfrance on the specific issue of how much water is used to produce beer. "A rule of thumb is that breweries use 5-10 times more water than actually leaves the premises as beer," says ColdRiverBrewing. According to an article earlier this year in the brewing industry trade press, SABMiller (Nastro Azzurro, Peroni, Grolsch, Miller, among other brands) has now vowed to cut its use of water to 3.5 litres of water per litre of beer brewed by 2015, a reduction of 25% on its 2008's figure. But SABMiller claims to have among the best environmental record in the business, so maybe the industry average is higher?

Sustain, the "alliance for better food and farming", agrees with the point made by Waterlizard and others about the need to support local producers in an effort to reduce the amount of energy used to ship our alcohol across the globe:

It has been calculated that the ingredients in locally brewed, locally drunk beer could, taken together, travel as little as 600 miles. A major brewer, exporting to the UK from, say, Germany, could accumulate 24,000 miles of transport for the ingredients and the product. Environmental costs could also be reduced if we followed the Danes' example, where 99% of all glass bottles are re-used. Only about 2% of UK beer was sold in returnable bottles in 1997.

It does seem to be a rather sensible conclusion that importing fewer liquids around the world wherever possible is a good thing from an environmental point of view. The same argument applies to bottled water, but I suppose many people in the world would be deprived of wine, for example, if you didn't allow the odd shipment of wine to leave the regions where vines can be commercially grown. (Imagine the rioting in wine-deprived nations!) Leadballon makes a valid point about this, though:

A reasonable strategy for the more distant wine sources is to look for locally bottled wine that has been transported in bulk. Unfortunately bulk transport is usually only the most generic varietal and origin available, Cabernet/Shiraz from South East Australia is about as specific as it gets. Light weight containers such as boxes are similarly restricted to the generics.

I'm not a big fan of cider myself (I'm not sure I've even ever tried perry), but I'm persuaded by the enthusiasm shown here for it. Cade, smartse, Mentalfloss, Titaflan, and andreakkk all put forward the case for why we should order a local cider at the bar over all other forms of

merriment. Cade probably says it the simplest: "Cider is just about as green as you can get. Mash up some apples, squeeze the juice out, barrel it up then just leave it."

I'm also persuaded by smartse's argument that apple orchards provide a more sustainable habitat for wildlife than, say, a field of barley or hops. But surely it all comes down to how intensively the farmer manages that acre of land.

The obvious alternative to all this, though, is producing your own alcohol at home. As roolbg and rashomonuk state, homebrewing can be a rewarding hobby. What's more, you can control exactly what goes into your brew as well as greatly minimising the packaging and transportation required. I'll certainly drink to that.

On 31 August, Leo originally wrote:

Vodka, wine, beer, whisky, sherry, gin: the drinks cabinet is well stocked, but which of these alcoholic refreshments causes the least damage to the environment during its production? Alternatively, is there any alcoholic drink you would argue provides environmental benefits? And would you - unlikely, I know - ditch your favourite tippie if it was shown to have a poor environmental record?

Please share your thoughts below and, as ever, I will return on Friday to join the debate.

. Please send your own environment question to ask.leo.and.lucy@guardian.co.uk. Or, alternatively, message me on Twitter [@leohickman](https://twitter.com/leohickman)

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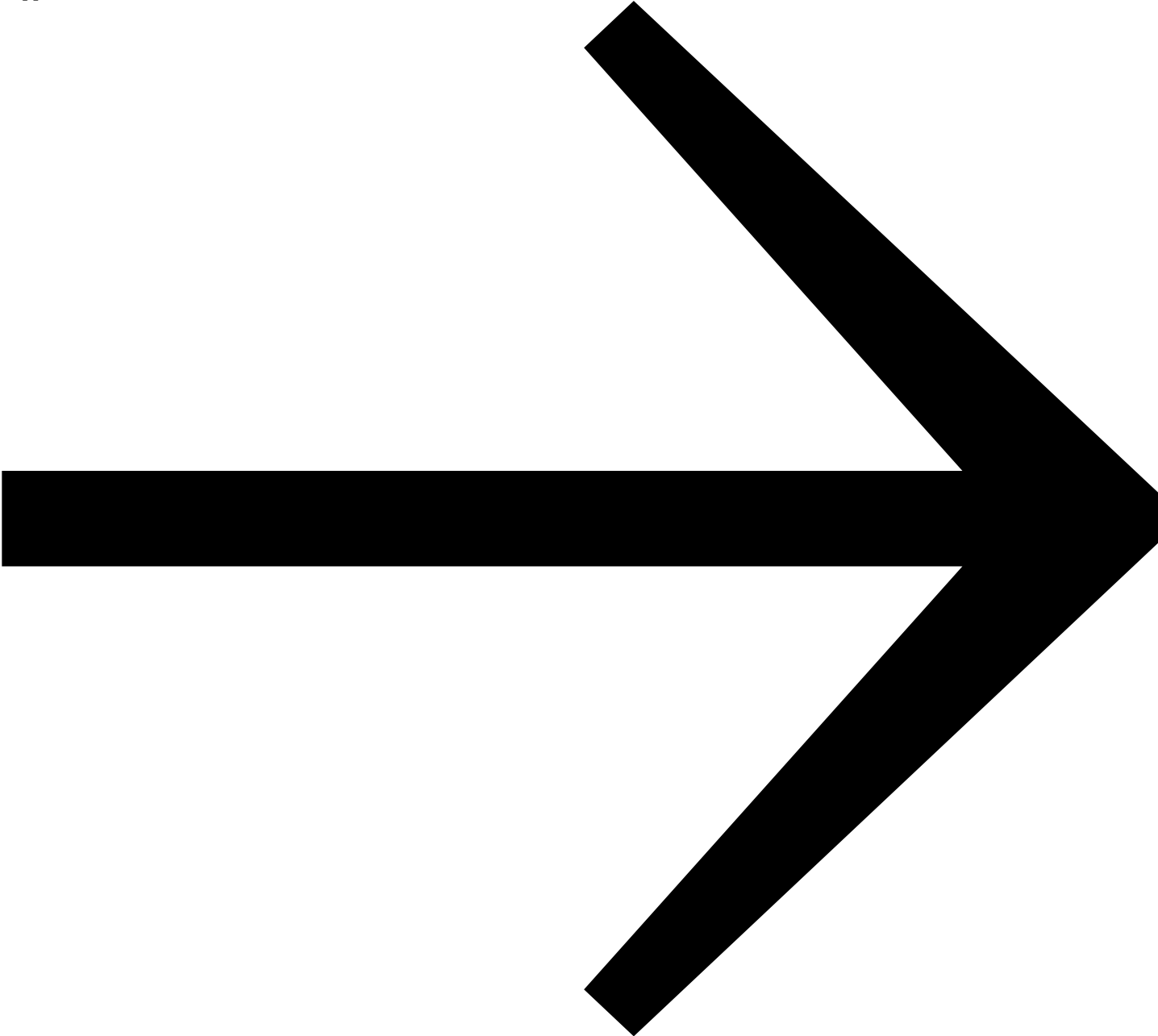
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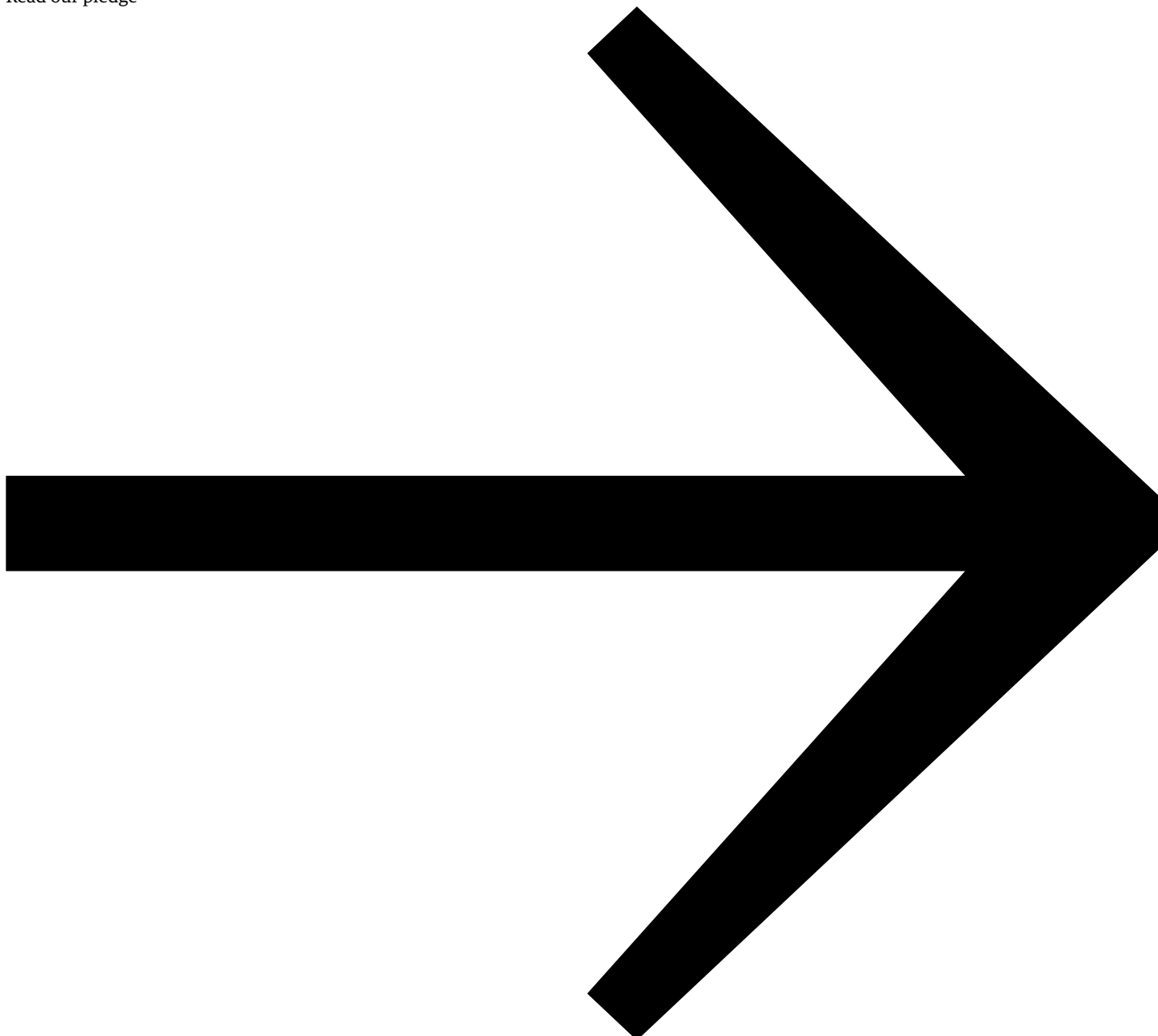
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