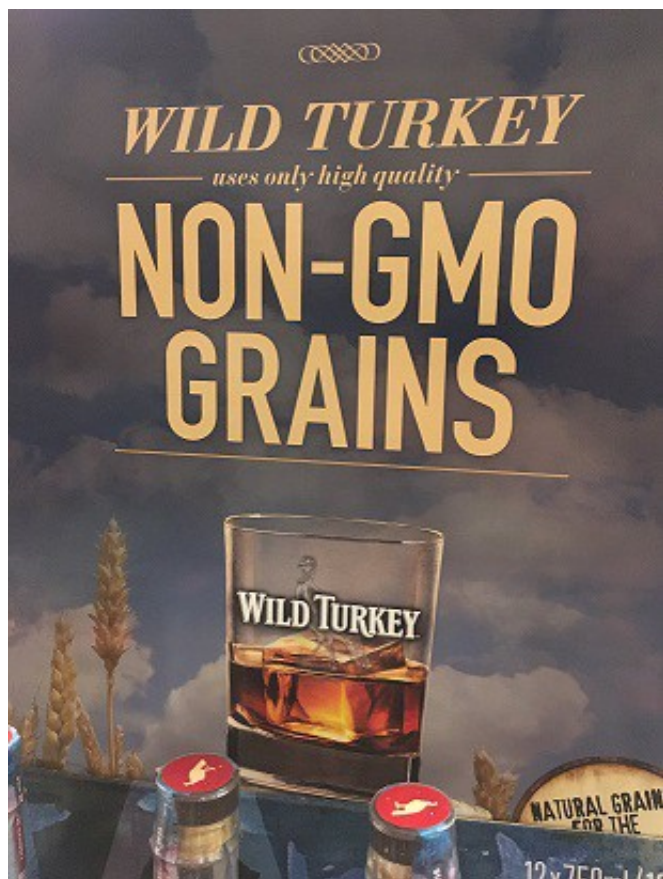


# Risky Whiskey or Science Under the Influence?

[Kevin Folta](#) Apr 3

This is a story about how poorly humans understand risk. This is also a story about the power of marketing. It also is a pathetic tome of misplaced energy, twisted values, and the Ultimate First-World Problem. First, take an aspirin and put a pillow on the desk in front of you, as your head is about to hit it — repeatedly and with gusto.

Yesterday I saw a graphic on Twitter from the whiskey maker Wild Turkey. They were boldly claiming that their product was “Non-GMO”. Not a little asterisk, but a big meaty font. Here is a company boldly stating that they consciously select non-genetically engineered ingredients, namely corn, one of the central grains in its alcoholic beverages. Instead of GE corn, they select conventional corn that costs farmers more money to grow, impacts topsoil harder, and uses more insecticides.



You wouldn't want any of the spooky genetic engineering vapors in that glass of IARC Group 1 carcinogen.

## **So why would they possibly want to source conventional corn?**

It is a marketing angle. When you read the rationale for the companies that source non-GE corn it really is just a veiled health claim. There are people out there that are certain that products from genetically engineered crops are killing them, even though there is no evidence of this over the last two decades of their presence as minor ingredients in 70% of grocery-store items. Some companies make the non-GMO claim to get into the wallets of the soft-science public, capturing their market share and booze dollars.

Wild Turkey is part of Campari America, a group that makes over fifty brands of familiar distilled spirits, so they have barrels of marketing savvy. Certainly no GMO-Free Wild Turkey swiller can say it is because they don't want to support big corporations. Campari America isn't exactly Ma and Pa's White Lightnin' Still.

## Several Brands of Non-GE Whiskey

A little more research would show that Wild Turkey, Buffalo Trace and Four Roses tout the fact that their corn comes from a non-genetically-engineered source. The story is told on [The Whiskey Wash](#) blog.

The blog included this paragraph, quoting the VP for Dark Spirits:

*“Candidly, I think this has been a missing in our marketing communications over the past couple years,” said Andrew Floor, VP of Marketing of Dark Spirits for Campari America, Wild Turkey’s parent company. “But we are looking to rectify that, as the non-GMO conversation is one that people care about. We have included that message in some of our social postings over the past 12 months and the reactions have been some of the strongest we’ve seen, so consumers obviously clearly care about what goes into the products they’re putting in their bodies.”*

## People care about what goes into their bodies. Really?

So people care passionately about a manufactured problem that does not at all exist, but they don’t care about the actual problem that clearly exists. Ethyl alcohol, the chemical that imparts its heady qualities and giddy impairment — is a known carcinogen. It is the stuff that crowds college-town emergency rooms, puts people on liver donor lists, and makes COPS a little more fun to watch — especially if you’re using it too. It is 40% of what whiskey is, and it unabashedly kills 88,000 people a year, either directly from overdoses, falls and car wrecks, or from manifestations of long-term disease.

*it is disingenuous to malign a technology that is harmless to sell more of something that is a proven poison.*

## IARC Says Group 1, Known Carcinogen

The double crazy irony is that many in the anti-GMO movement will claim they fear GE crops because the products might contain trace amounts of the herbicide glyphosate (parts per billion; e.g. seconds in 32 years). No reliable test has actually shown this. Then they center on glyphosate's controversial listing by the IARC a "Group 2A Probable Carcinogen" despite thin data to support that assignment. Since this announcement, some critical of genetic engineering are frozen in fear of this herbicide that isn't consumed in any great quantity, and even if it was, could maybe possibly remotely be problematic.

But the **same agency** rates ethyl alcohol as a **Group 1 Known Carcinogen**, along with benzene and formaldehyde. So 40% of whiskey is a known carcinogen, and the guy from Wild Turkey says people care about what they are putting in their bodies? After all, he is the VP of Dark Spirits.

That's a great business card.

Of course, everything in moderation, dose makes the poison, blah, blah, blah. As a somewhat responsible user of adult beverages I knowingly dance with the demon and certainly stagger along a fine line between risk and benefit. But it is disingenuous to malign a technology that is harmless to sell more of something that is a proven poison.

## **More Bad Science**

Over on the blog [Everybody Eats News](#) the story starts to make sense. The author tells a rational story about why the manufacturers are in a funny place. They have a product fermenting in barrels, and if the rules change and GE-based products are outlawed or must be labeled, then the future of those products is in jeopardy.

Finally someone is making sense.

The blog then quotes someone from Jack Daniel's, "We've never been

concerned by the use of GMO grains because not enough makes it through the distilling process to matter.”

He’s right. In fact, ***none of it is volatilized by distillation.*** No magical mystery unknown doom compounds are detected in the final product (except ethanol and congeners).

But the article goes on to interview someone from the Center for Food Safety, which is where science usually departs the conversation in exchange for manufactured risk — and he did not disappoint!

He says, “To assume that the only real risk is contamination of genetic material ignores the fact that these crops by and large will either produce an insecticide — which has been proved not to break down in the human gut — or are engineered to withstand exposure to herbicides. Residues of pesticides on corn present an increased exposure to consumers.”

A position he has no data to support, but his job is not to produce data, it is to conjure doubt. Through processing, fermentation and distillation you’d never find an insecticidal protein in that glass of 40% Group 1 Carcinogen. Proteins just don’t volatilize like that. But hey, that’s science, and Center for Food Safety doesn’t sweat the small stuff when there’s fear to be made.

Ironically, conventional corn requires much more insecticide application and the use of different herbicides. Those compounds are much more likely to be volatilized and present in the final concoction. Of course, they still are perfectly safe at those tiny residual levels.

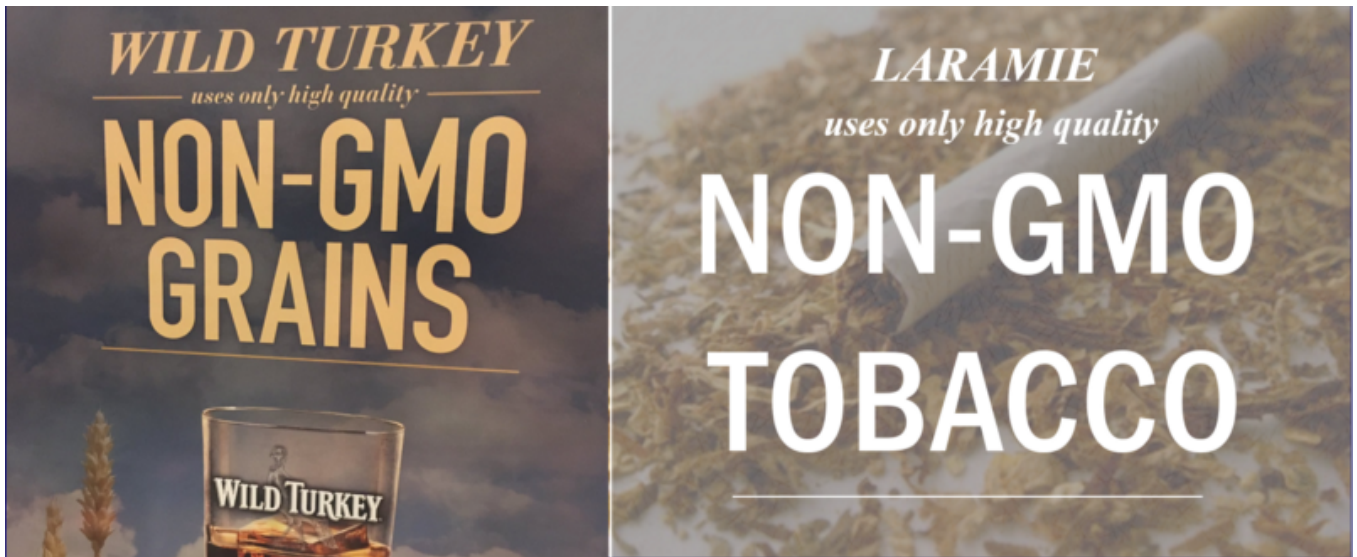
## **So What Evil Essence Would Transfer from a GE Crop to the Distilled Spirit?**

The real question is, what do they think is in the booze that makes it evil? It all goes back to the fundamental science. There is no test you can do on corn-based alcohol to distinguish if it came from a GE crop or non-GE

crop. When alcoholic spirits are distilled the ethanol, water and a handful of other volatiles are separated by heating to a vapor phase, that is then condensed into the distilled product. DNA, proteins, or any of the molecules that make a GE crop a GE crop stay put, right in the mash.

It all boils down to the same fundamental problem. People do not understand the science, they don't know what they are afraid of, and there are unscrupulous marketers out there ready to make a buck off of them after they can scare them first.

Companies can manufacture fake risk to increase profits, and bury real risk inherent in their products. It is classic misdirection, playing off of human fears and poor sense of where risk really is.



Maybe a picture is worth a thousand words.

