

HOLD THE LIQUOR

In London, the thirst for zero-proof beverages has never seemed stronger. But are entrepreneurs merely tapping into a transient trend, or is this a sign of a seismic shift in the market?

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Seedlip

Ingredients including allspice, cardamom and cascarilla tree bark are individually cold-macerated and distilled to form a blend with a refreshing and citrusy finish.

Kosmic

Nirvana Brewery's completely alcohol-free Kosmic stout is made with a toasted barley malt base and includes tasting notes of deep chocolate and fragrant vanilla.



I

t's barely 10am on an overcast Monday morning in an East London industrial estate and I'm already two pints down at one of London's newest taprooms. First up was a light and citrusy pale ale, followed by a tart and zingy sour beer redolent of berries. Now I'm guzzling a rich, chocolatey stout. But rest assured, I'm not drinking on the job. At least not technically. As it happens, Nirvana Brewery is London's first dedicated zero-proof brewery.

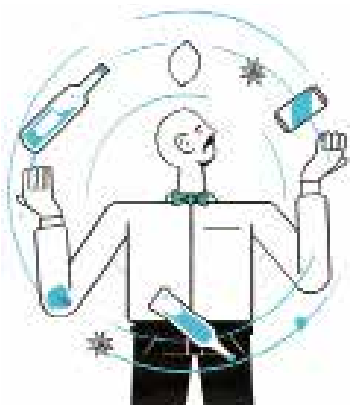
Drinking has long been synonymous with the British way of life, thanks to its robust pub culture. Lately, however, more zero- or low-alcohol beers, booze-free craft spirits and artisanal sodas are entering the market. In a city with some of the world's most storied pubs, award-winning mixologists and acclaimed sommeliers, it's certainly unexpected. Some say the widening range of non-alcoholic beverages is the result of the country's growing religious and ethnic diversity: Islam is now the second biggest religion in the UK. Others, meanwhile, argue it could be connected to alcohol-related diseases. A major study recently published in medical journal *The Lancet* found that alcohol was the primary risk factor for premature mortality and disability for the 15 to 49 age group, responsible for 20% of deaths.

But most insiders agree that the zero-alcohol trend has taken off in tandem with a thriving worldwide wellness industry, and a quest by many to live more

virtuous, healthy lifestyles. According to a report released this May by the Office for National Statistics, 20.4% of people in Great Britain over the age of 16 do not drink at all. This figure is as high as 26.6% in London. What's more, according to a 2017 GlobalData report, 84% of consumers around the world are actively trying to reduce or moderate their alcohol intake.

"I think people are becoming more aware of the effect of things like alcohol on their mental and physical health," explains 28-year-old Becky Kean, director of Nirvana Brewery. Her co-founder, the impressively moustached Steve Dass, concurs. "People are concerned about what they're putting into their bodies," the 52-year-old muses as he offers me a spicy, floral IPA. Both craft beer fans, the founders started Nirvana to address what they thought was an obvious gap in the market.

This ethos of mindfulness forms the core of their brand philosophy. Their warehouse facility is festooned with »



SODA POP

The alcohol-free industry isn't limited to zero-proof renditions of beers and spirits

Craft sodas are on the rise too, offering a sophisticated alternative to saccharine fizzy drinks.

Just ask Mustafa Mahmud. The affable 46-year-old is the founder of Shrb, which specialises in artisanal sodas that pay homage to Prohibition-style shrubs – cocktails traditionally made by infusing drinking vinegar with fruits and herbs. At his facility in Walthamstow, Mahmud steeps ingredients ranging from rose petals to star anise in apple cider vinegar for days on end, before carbonating, pasteurising and bottling the concentrate.

"I wanted to create a soft drink that works for a grown-up palate. Shrb has enough flavour complexity to keep [the drinker] entertained," Mahmud says. A teetotaler himself, his abstinence stems not from his Islamic faith, but from his martial arts background and views on health and fitness. Indeed, while Muslims make up 12.4% of London's population, Mahmud doesn't believe this is a major factor in the growth of the zero-alcohol industry. "I believe instead that there is a deeper shift in people's expectations around quality as well as a lifting of standards," he says.

colourful banners of *chakras* (energy wheels), while their logo – an open hand – is derived from an ancient reiki symbol. Their brews, too, come with spiritual names such as Tantra (a hoppy English pale ale) and Zen & Berries (a zesty sour beer recently launched in collaboration with London Fields Brewery). These bottles retail for about £2 – around the same price as a "real beer" from craft beer bigwigs such as BrewDog – and are brewed in much the same way as regular beers; however, they contain fewer grains and fermentables, thereby minimising their alcohol content.

Despite its success, Nirvana has faced its fair share of difficulties. For instance, this summer, its production was affected by a national shortage of carbon dioxide, which is used to carbonate beers. As a small-batch microbrewery, Nirvana relies on third-party bottlers, which often prioritise larger, big-name producers – much to Dass' frustration.

But things are looking up for small outfits such as Nirvana: consumer research firm Kantar Media revealed that 1.4 million households in the UK purchased a low- or no-alcohol beer in the last year, 57% more than two years ago. Carlsberg's CEO Cees 't Hart acknowledged that non-alcoholic beer had grown three times faster than the overall beer market in 2016, for example.

This past July, Nirvana exhibited at the third edition of the Mindful Drinking Festival in London, which drew over 15,000 attendees. The festival promotes a conscious approach to consuming alcohol and "brings the best of alcohol-free into one space for everyone to try," explains Laura Willoughby, the co-founder of Club Soda, the mindful drinking movement behind the festival.

In a previous life, the charismatic former politician was a heavy drinker but turned teetotal six years ago. I ask her if the zero-alcohol movement is merely a counter-current for folks in recovery. Not necessarily, says Willoughby. While she admits that Club Soda was primarily founded to help people who were seeking to cut back their alcohol consumption, she also believes that the trend is relevant to the young and old alike.

"Younger people are drinking less because they're more interested in the experience of a night out," she says. "They want good food, and they want drinks that look and feel special. Whether a drink has alcohol or not is less important."

Indeed, at some of London's fancier bars, you may come across cocktails made using zero-proof, calorie-free spirits such as Borrigo, which retails for £19.99 – about the price of a decent bottle of gin. The clear »

spirit is derived from a bouquet of aromatic botanicals, including cardamom and rosemary, which are individually steam-distilled and then blended. “If you come to a beautiful bar and order a Coca-Cola, it’s not really the same experience,” Borrigo founder Tom Tuke-Hastings says, gesturing at his surroundings. We’re chatting at Hix Soho, an upscale British restaurant adorned with art by the likes of Damien Hirst – the kind of space that cries out for an elegant, clear cocktail.

To oblige, Tuke-Hastings mixes up a glass of Borrigo with tonic, garnished with orange slices and basil leaves. It’s reminiscent of a conventional G&T, with peppery overtones and a long, clean finish. “The [zero-proof] options available today are quite sugary and downmarket, so I wanted to create something delicious, but with the theatre of a cocktail,” he continues.

But even if it tastes good, can a zero-proof drink really replicate the pleasure of a conventional tittle? Tuke-Hastings is adamant that it can. “Drinking isn’t about the alcohol coursing through your veins. It’s about sitting with friends... and enjoying something utterly delicious that’s part of a perfect moment,” he says.

To fully comprehend the evolution of London’s zero-alcohol landscape, it’s only right to speak to the man who arguably started it all. Ben Branson is the founder of Seedlip, which is credited with producing the world’s first distilled non-alcoholic spirit back in

November 2015. Growing up on a farm in Lincolnshire, the 35-year-old always had an interest in nature and agriculture, even dabbling in botanical distillation as a hobby. But it wasn’t until he was served a lacklustre, fruity mocktail at a London restaurant in 2013 that the seeds were sown for the idea of a zero-proof spirit.

“I got a lot of people telling me that it would never sell,” he admits. With his beard, tattoos and oversized spectacles, he looks like he could be a bartender at a Hoxton hotspot. “I didn’t have any benchmarks, nothing I could use as a guide... developing a whole new [production] process also took a lot of trial and error.”

Branson launched Seedlip Spice 94 at London department store Selfridges two years later, at a retail price of £29.99. With its elegant glass bottle and

sophisticated label, it could easily pass off as a top-shelf gin. Unlike gin, however, it doesn’t contain any alcohol; rather, it’s derived from botanicals such as allspice, cardamom and cascarilla tree bark, some of which are sourced from Branson’s own family farm. These are individually cold-macerated and distilled to form a complex, layered blend with a bright, citrusy finish. Whether or not the painstaking process and higher overheads of small-batch production justify the price tag, there are certainly plenty of buyers.

“I made a thousand bottles and had no idea what was going to happen, [but] they sold out in three weeks,” Branson says with a grin. “I made another thousand bottles after, and they sold out in three days.” Diageo, one of the

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world’s largest spirit producers, even acquired a stake in Seedlip in 2016; its first investment in a non-alcoholic drinks company.

Today, Seedlip is available at over 5,000 global retailers, bars, restaurants and hotels, including Atlas and Jigger & Pony in Singapore as well as the highly acclaimed – but sadly, soon to shutter – Dandelyan in London. The latter, which took the number one spot on the 2018 World’s 50 Best Bars list, is a swish Art Deco-style affair – all velour loungers and mirrored tables – that attracts a well-heeled clientele. »



Borrigo

Borrigo’s ingredients include botanicals such as peppermint, cardamom and rosemary, which are steam-distilled, blended and bottled.

“Non-alcoholic cocktails have always been a core part of our menu,” explains Alex Lawrence, Dandelyan’s tattooed, wiry head bartender. The Scotsman is one of the capital’s most celebrated mixologists, having been crowned Bartender of the Year at this year’s Class Bar Awards. “Dandelyan is all about inclusion and everyone should feel welcome here.”

Unlike many other bars such as Atlas, whose menu features a separate section of mocktails, Dandelyan offers zero-proof iterations of existing drinks. For instance, when Lawrence shakes up an alcohol-free version of Goose & Gander #2 – a heady mix of Grey Goose vodka, Martini Rubino, rootstock cordial, apple and soda – he replaces the first two ingredients with a dash of Seedlip Spice 94.

Still, are punters really willing to hand over £13 for a glass of herbs, juices and dressed-up sodas? I ask award-winning drinks writer, educator and broadcaster Jane Peyton to weigh in. “Simply put, the market responds to the demands of customers. The more people talk about these drinks, the more other people will be intrigued to try them. This creates a demand that compels bars and pubs to stock such drinks to serve the market. And as the market grows, brand owners will continue to innovate and improve and expand the range of such drinks,” says Peyton, who was recently named the UK’s first accredited cider sommelier. “Also, as more people start talking about no-alcohol drinks and normalising them, it takes away the stigma of not drinking.”

But responses elsewhere are mixed. Lawrence, for one, has his doubts about the longevity of zero-proof spirits. “The quality of [non-alcoholic] drinks will go up and more brands like Seedlip will come [along], but [ultimately] I think that the bubble will burst,” he says. “Whether or not the British are going to stop drinking as much, I sincerely doubt, because it’s such a [prevalent] culture. But [zero-alcohol] is probably more important in a place like London, because people drink so much. It becomes a lot more important to be moderate.”

Branson, on the contrary, is confident that London’s drinking culture has experienced a more seismic swing. “There’s a fundamental shift in the way people are consuming beverages and socialising... it’s right and relevant to people’s lives,” he reflects. “I hope we have opened people’s eyes to what is possible... and shown that cocktails can be complex and considered without alcohol. I feel like we’re only just getting started.” ■



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WHERE ZERO IS HERO

The best places to drink in London, sans alcohol



Dandelyan

You can order alcohol-free iterations of popular cocktails at this London institution. Do hurry, though – the bar will shutter at the end of the year, with a new concept slated to open in its place. dandelyanbar.com



Hakkasan

The Michelin-starred Cantonese restaurant recently launched a dedicated non-alcoholic menu called the Orchard List, which takes inspiration from ancient Asian recipes. hakkasan.com



The Drift

This sleek spot in the financial district offers a dedicated zero-proof menu. General manager Keiran Brown’s favourite is the Market Fizz: lemon, pomegranate juice, rose water and tonic water. drakeandmorgan.co.uk