

Nonalcoholic drink trend shows no sign of slowing down

Audrey Altmann May 27, 2020



Drinking in 2020 was ripe for embracing the low- and no-alcohol beverage trend, as consumers have been cutting down on their alcohol intake. The [2020 Cocktail Trends Report](#) by spirits brand Bacardi found that lower alcohol content in drinks was the No. 1 trend and Google searches for the term “mocktail” increased by 42% last year.

And while wine and spirits sales since the pandemic have seen steady increases, nonalcoholic beverage sales have shown no signs of slowing down either.

Alcohol-free bars and events

Sam Thonis opened Brooklyn, N.Y., alcohol-free bar [Getaway](#) in 2019 after he discovered his typical socializing in New York City changed when Thonis’ brother became sober. Bars and restaurants are the primary locations for people to meet in the city, meaning nonalcoholic options are limited, he said.

“We started thinking there was a need for an alcohol-free space,” said Thonis. “So, I took it and ran with it.”

Getaway’s menu includes mixed drinks, nonalcoholic beers and wines, shrubs, sodas, coffees and teas, meaning that the bar has beverages at varying price points. However, Thonis added that the prices on its mixed drinks haven’t been a barrier for customers, because the quality of the beverages and their ingredients merit a \$13 cost.

An early adopter of the nonalcoholic trend, Portland, Maine, cocktail bar and retail shop [Vena’s Fizz House](#) opened in 2013 with only alcohol-free drinks before adding alcoholic options in 2015.

“The people who come in looking for a mocktail are coming to us because it’s as well-crafted as a cocktail,” said Mary Jo Marquis, director of business development at Vena's Fizz House, adding that Vena’s never intended to be a pioneer of the sober-curious community, but rather it became “a trendsetter without even knowing it.”

Marquis has found the customers seeking out their booze-free offerings are often members of the sober community, women who are pregnant and still looking for a quality beverage, people who are [health-conscious](#) and those who she calls “beverage nerds” -- the enthusiasts who are seeking flavor and complexity in their drinks. Thonis finds that Getaway’s typical customers are split roughly in half between alcohol drinkers and nondrinkers.

Before coronavirus lockdown orders, [Yellow Bike Coffee](#) in Hermantown, Minn., had been the site of a weekly sober happy hour event for Sober Duluth, a Facebook group for the local sober community. The events offered craft mocktails, nonalcoholic beer and kombucha -- items that aren’t normally offered at the coffee shop.

“What we bring to this space is the brick and mortar,” said Shannon Cornelius, owner and co-founder of Yellow Bike Coffee, adding that coffee shops are ideal partners for sober organizations in hosting events because shops are typically closed at night and can provide a similar social experience without being the same environment as a bar.

Creating a no-alcohol mixed drink

[Seedlip](#), a well-known brand in the nonalcoholic spirits space that prides itself on being as high-quality as its alcoholic counterparts, makes spirits containing no alcohol, sugar or calories. The brand’s products take six weeks to make through “bespoke maceration, copper pot distillation and filtration process for each individual ingredient,” according to Ben Branson, founder of Seedlip.

“There are lots of reasons as to why anyone might not be drinking,” said Branson. “We think they should still get a good, grown-up option.”

The process of creating and mixing nonalcoholic mixed drinks at Getaway and Vena’s is similar to the process of making traditional cocktails, Thonis and Marquis agreed. However, mocktails tend to be created around fresh ingredients, making refrigerated storage behind the bar more of a priority and standardized cocktail formulas less relevant, according to Thonis.

Marquis said Vena’s menu is focused on “hard-to-find, nostalgic ingredients like shrubs and switchels and bitters -- those sort of old-fashioned, yummy ingredients that made drinks really good and really good for you.”

Reaching consumers during the pandemic

While many foodservice businesses have struggled to adapt to shutdown orders for bars and restaurants across the country, alcohol-free bars already needed to find multiple sources of revenue beyond dine-in drink services pre-pandemic.

After New York businesses were ordered to close to diners, Getaway changed its focus; Thonis has kept the space open seven days a week as a coffee shop for to-go orders, and he continues to sell retail items such as bottles of nonalcoholic spirits and bags of coffee beans. Gift cards for future purchases are also available.

Vena's Fizz House sells its own [line of retail beverage products](#) online that consumers can use to create their own mocktails or cocktails at home. The business also pivoted to hosting its [mixology classes](#), which include mocktail-making lessons, virtually via Zoom. Marquis said Vena's has been thankfully surprised at the large demand for these offerings during stay-at-home orders.

"Because everybody is inside and they are taking their social platforms online ... they are having cocktail hours, and our products are the perfect thing for that," she added.

Seedlip also offers its products direct-to-consumers online, and the company "believes that choice and moderation is top-of-mind for many consumers now," said Branson.

To continue to connect with those consumers during the coronavirus pandemic, Seedlip is responding to feedback and interacting directly on its social feeds. A [Cocktail Masterclass series](#) is available on Instagram via IGTV featuring the brand's global ambassadors mixing recipes from Seedlip's own [cocktail book](#), and the company is also preparing the 2021 US debut of its sister brand, [Æcorn Drinks](#), which is a line of nonalcoholic bitter aperitifs.

During the week of May 9, Year-over-year sales of nonalcoholic beer in the US rose 44%, according to [data](#) from market research firm Nielsen. Nonalcoholic spirits-maker [Lyre's](#) also reported a 400% increase in online sales since the coronavirus pandemic began. These figures indicate that consumers are seeking out more alcohol-free options that still offer an adult beverage experience during stay-at-home orders.

"That market has always been there, but they haven't always been catered to ... as options begin to pop up, more of the market came out of hiding," said Thonis. "The people who were settling for water or seltzer for years started saying, 'Oh, there is something better out there for me.'"