



## CHANGING TASTES

Maybe you've noticed something a little different amongst friends, whānau or colleagues at social gatherings in the last few years. Kiwis are increasingly exchanging their favourite tippie for an alcohol-free drink, and they are doing it consciously, and willingly.

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### THE ZERO ALCOHOL SECTIONS

invading the wine aisles and the 'mock' on our cocktail lists is part of a rising new trend of mindful drinking, often called 'sober curious'. Embracers of this new trend are people who normally do, and can, drink alcohol (i.e. who don't experience an alcohol use disorder which requires abstinence), but who are adding more alcohol-free occasions and options into the mix.

The term itself was first coined by American writer Ruby Warrington, in her 2018 book *Sober Curious: The Blissful Sleep, Greater Focus, Limitless Presence, and Deep Connection Awaiting Us All on the Other Side of Alcohol*. Warrington also offers a podcast on the topic for those who are audibly curious.

If you have ever asked yourself why you had that (extra) drink, what are you getting from alcohol (taste, effect, to fit in etc.), why you drink in a particular setting, or whether you really even wanted a drink, then perhaps you are sober curious. Essentially, that means taking a more considered approach to how much alcohol you consume, and when, where and why you drink.

And the great news is that in 2023, there is a wide and ever-increasing range of alcohol-free spirits, wines, ready-to-drinks, beers and even liqueurs to choose from, some of which are produced right here in Aotearoa.

The popularity of mindful drinking has grown over the last decade. People have been dipping their swizzle stick into alcohol-free choices – usually the standard soft drinks and fizzy water – for some years with Feb Fast and Dry



July, but it's taken off more widely in the last five years.

It's particularly popular amongst younger people, who are switching away from booze for a variety of reasons, including a growing understanding of the effects of alcohol, increased awareness of the importance of balance to our mental and physical wellbeing, a desire to embrace 'cleaner' lifestyles, and

the decrease of the bars and pubs as a prime point of social connection. Then, whilst pandemic lockdown initially created a spike in alcohol consumption, it also gave many people an opportunity to examine their overall balance of life, including their use of alcohol.

The benefits are significant, including lower blood pressure and cholesterol, and better mood – alcohol





is a known depressant and can increase anxiety. There's the joy of no hangovers, booze bloat, or fear of the random breath tests and, if it matters to you, you are ditching a lot of empty calories. Furthermore, you have the pleasure of being more mindful in your choices and savouring the times when you do drink. What's not to love?

As the interest in selective sobriety has grown, it has stimulated a whole new beverage industry – non-alcoholic versions of all your favourite traditionally alcoholic drinks. People who are redefining their relationship with alcohol are finding their choices are better than ever before, and easily available from supermarkets and bottle stores. These are a great alternative for those who want to cut down on alcohol without giving up taste.

In 2015 a bar owner in Auckland gave an alcohol-free bar a shot; it lasted five weeks. He may have been

too far ahead of its time, but entirely alcohol-free bars have been popping up in big cities in the US and Europe, and they are proving more successful. If you are heading out to socialise locally, you still have more options than ever before. An increasing number of bars, clubs, restaurants and other venues are stocking grown-up alcohol-free drinks, often so similar to their alcoholic precursors in look or smell that you may not even recognise them as different. For that very reason, those who need total sobriety may find that these non-alcoholic versions are so realistic that they are still best avoided.

Most bars now have an alcohol-free beer on offer and possibly mocktails, but you can forget about non-alcoholic wines. To be fair, they can be hit and miss on taste. In a few upmarket bars you might find mocktails that feature non-alcoholic spirits, whilst in most venues, they will likely be pure fruit

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juice mixes. Many bars still don't list mocktails and, whilst they are generally happy to make an alcohol-free version of a cocktail for you, as a non-drinker, it's nice to see them listed and know what you are going to get (and what they will cost, sans alcohol). It's also nice to feel that you are welcome.

New Zealand producers are beginning to embrace the alcohol-free

trend, although the technology and the creativity required to pack in the flavour, whilst removing the alcohol, makes them more expensive to create, and buy. Local Canterbury wine producer Giesen has invested heavily in their alcohol-free wines and now offers an extensive selection in their '0' range. Perennial Christmas and race-day favourite Lindauer has two 'Free' versions, and Auckland-based Ecology offers several alcohol-free gins, including pre-mixed options in cans. There's more local choice in beer from brewers such as Garage Project, Bach Brewing and fully zero-beer producers State of Play.

If your local drinks supplier doesn't have the range you need, you can choose from a wide range of specialist online suppliers such as Clear Head and Altered and, if you are in Auckland, you can visit the AF Store in person for



alcohol-free-only options – including liqueurs and aperitifs – from New Zealand and the rest of the world.

Mindful drinking looks set to be part of a continuing evolution in how we approach wellbeing, health

and socialising. If you don't want to kiss goodbye to the booze forever, maybe now's a good time to create a more meaningful relationship with alcohol. What have you got to lose? Get curious. ●

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