



The Age of Zero

My early thirties were filled with spirited fervor, as is with many in their formative 'alcohol fueled' years. Then there were those sporadic moments when you'd abstain due to various reasons – health, religious interventions, saturation... dry January anyone? In my sober period, I would carry French sparkling water to house parties and steal lime wheels to pop in my pretend gin and tonic.

This resonates with Julia Bainbridge, a New Yorker whose bestselling book *Good Drinks: Alco-hol-Free Recipes for When You're Not Drinking for Whatever Reason* is a resounding success. It followed close on the heels of a New York movement in 2015-2018 when a large portion of the beverage menu real estate was devoted to alcohol-free cocktails. Bartenders

were (and still are) pushing the boundaries that had previously limited 'mocktails' to syrup-laden juices or glorified Shirley Temples, and consumers – sober or not – got curious. "I began to codify a just-emerging drinks landscape."

American bar owners, bartenders and beverage writers are all vehemently pitching the message of low or zero alcohol drinks.

Amanda Fewster moved to Etta in Los Angeles five years ago, when she first heard of this trend. She has recently introduced invigorating lower alcohol options on her A.M. menus. Her favorite is *Bergamot Buzz* (Italicus Bergamot liqueur, fresh squeezed grapefruit juice, Pellegrino & burnt rosemary garnish) which

clocks in at 20% ABV – half of a regular vodka/gin cocktail. The half spritzes – ginger & turmeric tea style with bubbles give the drinker the experience of a cocktail. A guest in her 7th month of pregnancy had three of these spritzes and was thrilled to enjoy a beautiful 'cocktail' in her hand. "I love the joy people get out of such little details in life," concludes Amanda. California is seeing a jump in low or zero alcohol beverage options on the shelf.



Photo: Etta

Jon Rugg introduced Sawtelle Sake in smartly designed cans. "The idea of a low alcohol cocktail in a can became a real alternative to beer", says Jon. He also believes that the consumer base is becoming much more informed about what they're drinking with regards to ingredient transparency.

Similarly, Brian 'Vito' Morales of Saso Bistro in Pasadena, offers many spritzes naturally low on alcohol, Aperol Spritz being the most popular. He

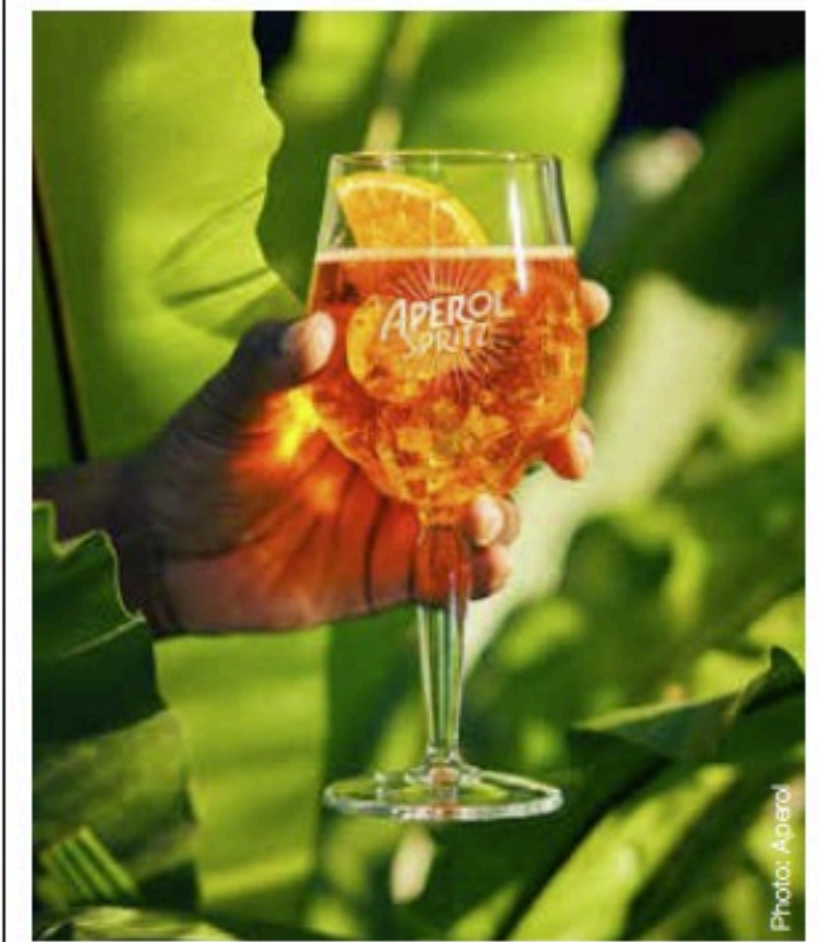


Photo: Aperol

also does an 1860s classic 'Americano' – similar to a Negroni but uses seltzer water instead of gin. In fact, all his specialty cocktails can be made to accommodate low alcohol by dialing down the amount of spirit used. A quintessential bar menu in India would include both half and full pours – maybe inadvertently this was a way to cut down on alcohol? Is America legitimately circling on that train of thought?

Globally, we have come a long way when it comes to options for non-drinkers, minors and temporary



Photo: Karina Frederick Studio

abstainers alike. Zero and low alcohol beverages have found a niche for people who love alcohol but also fill a need for those who do not. It seems that in India, bars began to focus on creating low alcohol options only recently, as the pandemic hit the world. Bar Max, who creates incredibly innovative cocktails on his instagram disagrees: "Low alcohol cocktails are not new – think Sangrias, Mimosas, Shandies and Spritzers."

Bars in India are playing it safe though. "It's still a nascent industry" says Varun Sudhakar, of Bar

Some established brands are kicking up a non-alcoholic storm

Bundle, who thinks that this category first needs to create awareness within the bar community to see the shift trickle down to consumers. While gin rules the roost in bars, the allure of wines fuels a Sangria culture – the menus based on wines work well. They may not be pegged as 'low alcohol cocktails', but one can see the category slowly take form on bar menus.



Pankil Shah of Woodside Inn also believes the introduction of low or zero alcohol cocktails is trending. "The health-conscious look to consume lower calories in alcohol without compromising on the complex flavours in a cocktail". Brunch is an excellent opportunity to introduce such cocktails. Frozen Campari Lemonade (ABV 20%) was a hot-seller at his friendly neighbourhood bars as a part of their #DayTripping campaign, which focused on day-centric food and beverage creations.

Some established brands are kicking up a non-alcoholic storm. Svami has created a zero-alcohol gin and tonic. Co-founder Aneesh Bhasin was initially not convinced about this segment. "Our zero alcohol cocktails were popping up in baby shower hampers and we realized we have a whole untapped segment to cater to." This segment today forms 15% of their portfolio.

It's becoming evident amongst the fraternity, in India as well as the West, that using various wines, spirits and non-alcoholic spirits to create a magical experience for discerning consumers is the way of the future. The Age of Zero is likely upon us.

Mumbai-born Nikhil Merchant is a foodie, restaurateur & writer (Nonchalant Gourmand) who lives in Los Angeles.



Photo: Fox trot Beverages Pvt Ltd