

YOU DON'T NEED BOOZE TO RUN A GREAT BAR

THERE'S DRY JANUARY, SOBER SEPTEMBER AND MORE PEOPLE DRINKING LESS ALCOHOL. IS THIS A QUIRKY TREND OR A NEW WAY OF LIFE? **BY HAL CONICK**



Chris Marshall
of Sans Bar
in Austin, Texas.

For nearly 20 years, Jeff Stevens traveled the world as a beer and spirits creative executive, wining and dining clients in booze-heavy cities like London, Chicago and New York. One problem: Stevens didn't drink alcohol, having quit when he was 24. He still groans when considering all the old coffee and diet soda he'd choke down as clients sipped rich red wines and hoppy craft beers. Stevens resented them—where was his tasty drink?

One day, some friends pitched Stevens an idea that solved his problem and might make some money. Soon after, Stevens founded WellBeing Brewing Company, which he says is one of the first craft breweries dedicated entirely

to nonalcoholic beers. His goal was to create a nonalcoholic beer that actually tastes good rather than like the watery, unfermented nonalcoholic beers that were on the market.

To create a tasty booze-free beer, WellBeing scrapped the popular method of boiling off the alcohol. Instead, brewers removed alcohol from fully fermented beer in a vacuum at

room temperature; Stevens says that this method keeps the beer flavorful. The first time Stevens sipped WellBeing's beer, he knew that they had surpassed other nonalcoholic beers on the market. "It was a low bar," he says with a laugh. Now, Stevens says, WellBeing is trying to brew enough beer to catch up with market demand.

Stevens isn't alone in teetotaling, as more people across the world are drinking less often. Drinks-market analysis firm IWSR reports that globally, alcohol consumption fell 1.6 percent in 2018, with American consumption dropping 0.8 percent. In England, research published in BMC Public Health found that the number of 16- to 24-year-old nondrinkers rose from 18 percent in 2005 to 29 percent in 2015. And as cannabis is legalized, the number of nondrinkers may continue to rise; a 2017 study published in *SSRN Electronic Journal* finds that

alcohol sales dropped 12 percent in countries with legalized medicinal cannabis.

As people have cut their drinking, they've demanded more nonalcoholic options. *Bon Appétit* reports that low- and no-alcohol beverages are poised to grow 32 percent between 2018 and 2022, which is triple the growth this category had experienced in the five previous years. And the nonalcoholic beer market has grown, too, with *The Wall Street Journal* reporting a 3.9 percent sales increase in each of the past five years. The alcohol-free trend likely will continue to grow, as large companies have taken notice. AB InBev—brewer of beers including Budweiser, Corona and Stella Artois—has vowed to generate a fifth of its global beer sales from low- and no-alcohol brands by 2025. Even Coca-Cola has started a non-alcoholic cocktail brand called Bar

Nøne, which will feature booze-free takes on sangria and Moscow mules.

But this alcohol-free trend goes deeper than a desire for tastier drinks: People also want better health and booze-free social lives. Dry January, a month when people abstain from drinking, has become extremely popular; market research firm YouGov reported that 23 percent of Americans planned to participate in 2019. Now, some have gone further by attempting Dry July and Sober September. These months seem to be more than a placebo: In 2016, a study followed 857 British adults who tried an alcohol-free month, with 62 percent of participants reporting that they slept better and 49 percent reporting that they lost weight.

Then there are the string of events and bars popping up for people who want to socialize without social lubrication. New York City's

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Club SÖDA (Sober Or Debating Abstinence) hosts alcohol-free talks, events and parties for the “sober curious.” Then there’s Brooklyn’s Getaway, an alcohol-free bar that serves drinks called “shrubs,” starring pungent ingredients such as vinegar and ginger. In London, the alcohol-free Redemption Bar offers beetroot martinis, perhaps the drink of choice for a dry James Bond.

But Sans Bar, located in Austin, Texas, may have the most unique journey of any booze-free bar. Sans Bar founder Chris Marshall sobered up in 2007 after struggling with alcoholism since he was a teen. He became a substance abuse counselor and noticed that many sober people—even those who had never struggled with addiction—had trouble engaging with other people without alcohol, especially in a party city like Austin. In 2017, Marshall

founded Sans Bar, an alcohol-free bar open on Fridays and some Saturdays. Marshall says that it’s a good night at Sans Bar when you can close your eyes and hear the same sounds as those at a regular bar in Austin: talking, laughing, music, clanking glasses. But the focus at Sans Bar isn’t the drinks, it’s conversation and mental health.

All bartenders at Sans Bar are trained in mental health first aid, Marshall says, as he wants them to help people who are struggling with social anxiety or feeling disconnected from people around them. Marshall points to interaction and connection as reasons why it’s important to keep the word *bar* in the name Sans Bar. Bars are traditionally where society gathers, he says. A century ago, people would get married, hold court or vote in bars, just as they now gather to socialize with friends

on weekends—and Marshall believes that people should still be able to gather in a bar, even without alcohol.

In 2019, Marshall quit his job as a substance abuse counselor, started working full-time on Sans Bar and took the Sans Bar concept on tour. He’s visited Portland, New York, Washington D.C. and even gone north of the border to Toronto. Now he wants to open more brick-and-mortar Sans Bar locations, with a goal of becoming the “Starbucks of sober bars.” He believes that the non-alcohol and sober movement is more than a trend—it’s a cultural shift.

“I think that this is one of the first times in Western culture that we’re really starting to evaluate the role that alcohol plays in our lives,” Marshall says. “We’re all waking up and understanding that you can have an experience that is fun and engaging without alcohol. You really can.” ▼

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