

## LIFE

# New Jersey's sober curious movement has grown well beyond Dry January



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Russell Lewis is no stranger to experimenting with cocktails or offering inclusive drinks.

For 14 years, his Jersey Shore cocktail lounge has offered a culinary approach to cocktail making — including non-alcoholic drinks.

Mocktails have been on the menu at Watermark in Asbury Park since it opened, with Lewis creating “low” and “no” alcohol drinks, as identified on the menu.

“We didn't get a lot of notice for our low- and no alcohol cocktails,” he said. “They were not really what people were getting excited about. However, we felt it was important to have them as part of our story.”

But attitudes about alcohol consumption have been shifting with the buzz for non-alcoholic beverages going well beyond Dry January and evolving into a sober curious movement — one that has made its way to New Jersey.

According to Gallup, alcohol consumption has been decreasing since 2010 and data analysts at Nielsen found that non-alcoholic beverage sales increased between 2020 and 2021, totaling \$331 million.

The 2022 Food and Beverage Flavor Report by California-based T. Hasegawa USA found top beverage trends included “more functional drinks that claim to help people focus, relax and relieve emotional health concerns” and drinks that build a strong immune system as the pandemic carries on.

With the increased interest in healthier living, companies around the world are embracing non-alcoholic drinks and offering alternatives for nondrinkers.

Monday crafts nonalcoholic spirits like whiskey and gin with zero carbs, no sugar and zero calories in their Southern California distillery. In Brooklyn, St. Agrestis offers the Phony Negroni that has pronounced juniper, citrus and floral notes along with the usual bitterness. And across the pond, Pentire distills plants native to Cornwall, creating plant-based, non-alcoholic spirits.

Restaurateurs, bar and boutique owners in the Garden State are heeding this expanding curiosity for non-alcoholic drinking.

In Cherry Hill, mixologist and bar manager Danny Childs develops mocktails with tea substitutions for The Farm and Fisherman Tavern.

House-made sodas (ginger beer, celery, grapefruit tepache, lemon-lime, "farm-dry" cranberry ginger ale), kombuchas (tavern tea with lemongrass and cranberry sage) and a rhubarb and white balsamic shrub and club also are offered. Plus, the restaurant carries Brooklyn Brewery's N/A Hoppy Lager. Kombuchas contain a small amount of alcohol.

At The **Fare** Porter in Haddonfield, partners Marcello De Feo and Johnnie Reynolds are working with Carla Camerieri of the Thirsty Camel Cocktails blog to curate an alcohol-free cocktail menu for their March 3 opening.

There will be six cocktails — three traditional cocktails like non-alcoholic margaritas and three more craft, artisanal libations.

A non-alcoholic cocktails menu is something De Feo has wanted to implement for a while. So when he started working on his new venture, he was determined to include it.

"What I feel like Carla creates, in part, is an experience and we want to bring that into it," De Feo said. "It's something unique. It's something different. It gives people an opportunity to have something to drink differently than just going and getting a Pepsi or whatever it may be ... It adds a new layer to the restaurant."

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## **What's led to booze-free beverage trend?**

In the last two to three years, Lewis, who comes from a New York cocktail-making background, has seen an uptick of guests ordering his mocktails and enthusiastic reactions for them on social media.

After talking with other bar owners and hospitality colleagues nationally and internationally, Lewis said the sober curious movement has been spreading for some time, especially with the legalization of marijuana.

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“I believe it's spawned by millennials who are now coming to drinking age ... let's just say 20 to 25 (year olds),” he said. “There's a big movement of that age group of the millennials who are not looking for alcohol ... The theories I have heard is that young kids are into gummies (weed-infused candy) and that gummies are really popular and they're smart enough not to mix alcohol with them.”

In Pennsauken, Bobby Ray Harris of Bobby Ray's Pennsauken Tavern recently had a conversation with his beverage company, which distributes for Anheuser-Busch, about how the non-alcoholic market has taken off.

Ray offers non-alcoholic drinks but not at the scale he'd like to be. With companies as big as Anheuser-Busch jumping on the trend, he sees nonalcoholic drinks becoming more mainstream.

“We're definitely going to offer some of those non-alcoholic drinks that are coming out and I'm excited about it,” Harris shared. “I think people are going to come in and they're going to order (the drinks). For those who decide not to drink ... they can get a little more flavor and have one of these Ghost-type drinks.”

Christina Emma of the legendary farm-to-table restaurant Ninety Acres at Natirar in Peapack-Gladstone saw the popularity of mocktails rising three years ago.

Soon after, she made certain her menu always included three mocktails to satisfy the high demand.

“There are so many people that this accommodates — before it was always just people who don't drink anymore or people who are pregnant or people who have kids,” Emma said. “It really applies to a lot of different people. A lot of people do appreciate us for having it on the menu. And we've seen a huge amount of sales with it.”

Emma said sober curiosity is about people being more conscious about their drinking habits.

“I think it's becoming more of a trend — obviously, because of the pandemic — and other scenarios,” she added. “It's definitely been more of a thing as of the last few years.”

## **Pandemic shifted the drinking mindset**

Others agree the pandemic has led people to shift their drinking mentality.

"A lot of people have stopped drinking," said Childs, who is also a beverage writer with a cookbook due out in 2023 named after his Slow Drinks column in Edible Jersey magazine. "A lot of them felt they drank too much during the pandemic, and there is a huge explosion in the non-alcoholic drinks realm."

For Amy Howlett, the pandemic was the tipping point for this burgeoning market.

“I think it's kind of like when you roll a snowball and it just keeps picking up — more people,” Howlett said. “And the more people I find out about (that are sober curious), other people come out of the woodwork.”

Howlett co-founded General Store Cooperative in Maplewood, a co-retail space with 60 businesses rotating through and more than five permanent businesses.

Essential Spirits, which offers products like CBD beverages, alcohol-free wine and distilled spirits, non-alcoholic beers and more, started small with a few non-alcoholic drinks in January 2021 then expanded throughout the year as interest increased, establishing itself as a permanent business in the space.

“It was really just kind of me drinking too much during the pandemic and wanting to experiment with other options,” Howlett shared.

The pandemic pushed a lot of people over the edge, she said.

Howlett recalls her husband and neighbors enjoying cocktail hour every day during the pandemic. She said people eventually re-evaluated their alcohol consumption, realizing they might be drinking too much which led to finding alternatives.

Owner of Gem Life + Bar in Pitman, Drew Davis agrees the trend has expanded because “we spent two years kind of like locked in our little bubbles and a lot of people just turned to drinking or drinking more.”

Like Howlett, Davis and her husband would have daily happy hours before she suffered a health scare. After re-evaluating her physical and mental health, she and her husband shifted their mindset on drinking — something she thinks people are catching on to.

“I think that now that the market is growing and expanding, there are so many different alternatives,” she said. “We don't have to turn to alcohol; we can normalize being sober.”

“I'm probably more fun than I ever was before,” she continued. “I have more clarity, more mindset, [I'm] more goal-driven. I think a lot of Americans are kind of in the same boat of, 'This no longer serving me.' ”

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## **Is sober curiosity here to stay?**

For Davis, the trend hasn't even peaked. She envisions it growing dramatically over the next two or three years with a plethora of options becoming available.

Gem Life + Bar is Pitman's neighborhood booze-free bottle shop with a pop-up bar that offers more than 55 different female, BIPOC brands of non-alcoholic beers, wines and spirits as well as CBD elixirs, apoptogenic and nootropics (non-prescription substances used to cope with stress or enhance brain performance respectively) drinks and sparkling waters.

She hopes to expand her store with more locations.

“I think that there's been a lot of people who haven't drunk and we just didn't really realize it and they really had no options either,” Davis observed.

Jessica Craig, the founder of Tarta, thinks that restaurants and bars that incorporate alcohol-free drinks into their cocktail and daily menus will see a spike in sales and customer loyalty.

The Princeton-based company sells seltzer water infused with premium quality fruit balsamic online and at local stores like General Store Cooperative. Craig's next move is to distribute to restaurants and bars in the coming year.

Craig's beverage provides the sober community with a healthy ingredient in their mocktails.

“It prevents whatever they decide to mix it with from becoming overly sweet, from becoming overly caloric and kind of negligible and not good for their body,” she explained. “Tarta is filling that gap, I think, beautifully because it's so versatile.”

She expects the market to grow as she's seen her company blossom with high volumes of sales.

“I think the restaurants that fill this gap and listen to the consumer and offer it will be so surprised by how many people take them up on it,” Craig expressed. “Because there are so many people out there that would love to stop drinking or [are] sober curious or just have to stop drinking because of other reasons and they have felt underserved.”

As a bar owner, Lewis is nervous and excited about this shift. He's continued to focus on non-alcoholic drinks, working with CBD and other infusions in his booze-free beverages.

He advises those in the hospitality industry to join the trend, as he thinks it's only going to get stronger in the next 10 years.

“Anyone in the hospitality industry — whether you're a bar, restaurant, hotel, whatever — you have to be working on alternative cocktails that are lower in alcohol or completely void of alcohol, but still making things that are fresh and creative and interesting to put in people's hands when they go out and socialize,” he said.

Emma agrees that her fellow mixologists have to get more creative with booze-free cocktails. She plans to experiment with infused ice cubes, vinegars, elixirs and more, upping her game from fresh juices and syrups.

“We can come up some creative and make different tonics and different cool things,” she said.

“A lot of people mistaken non-alcoholic cocktails as sweet cocktails. But it's not always the case. We can do some more acid and herbaceous notes. And I think that's the trend that's going to become more and more popular as the years go on.”

*Hira Qureshi covers food and drink for South Jersey at the Courier Post, Burlington County Times and Daily Journal. She can be reached at [HQureshi@gannettnj.com](mailto:HQureshi@gannettnj.com) or 856-287-8106. Help support local journalism with a digital subscription.*