

# “Sober Curious”

*What does the no alcohol/low-alcohol trend really mean for craft distillers?*

*Written by Rich Manning*

In 2019, the dawn before the Volstead Act's century mark, a new type of temperance seemed ready to threaten the distilling industry. It wasn't a ban, of course, but a cacophony of buzzy catchphrases like “alcohol-free,” “low-alcohol,” and “sober curious” that created enough of a din to generate numerous think-pieces that explored a growing movement involving non-alcoholic beverages, reduced booze consumption, and — naturally — millennials. Some of these stories covered the movement as a hot trend to watch. Other screeds wittingly or unwittingly contained an undercurrent of “MILLENNIALS ARE SLOWLY KILLING THE BOOZE INDUSTRY! BOOGA-BOOGA!” For craft distilleries nursing razor-thin profit margins and/or dealing with the headaches of getting started, it would be justifiable if the latter articles' fear-mongering vibe put the fear of Carry Nation into their souls (for the uninitiated Carry Nation was a radical member of the temperance movement notorious for vandalizing bars and destroying bar inventory in the name of God. She wasn't fun at parties).

There was plenty of evidence of the movement being in full swing last June, when I attended the Specialty Food Association's annual Summer Fancy Food Show in New York. With all apologies to The Beastie Boys, no and low was the tempo at the show, and the category of drinks aggressively marketing themselves as alternatives to booze spread wide across the Javits Center's massive sprawl. There appeared to be enough steam throughout the latter half of 2019 to assume that a similar crush of like-minded vendors would be present when I visited SFA's Winter Fancy Food Show in San Francisco's Moscone Center in January.

Except that they weren't. Don't get me wrong — there were plenty of non-alcoholic and low-alcoholic beverage companies on Moscone's floor touting their products. However, the ones vigorously tying themselves to the “sober curious” movement were scant compared to what I saw last summer. In their place were vendors that were more open to the concept of what could be re-

ferred to as a “complete craft drinker.” That is, an individual that will want to seek out premium or craft beverages to round out their non-alcoholic and alcoholic drinking habits. These are the drinkers that will flock to properly made, great tasting craft spirits, but they'll also purchase artisanal teas, craft sodas, or small-batch low-alcohol ciders for those nights where they don't feel like imbibing in the hard stuff.

For these non-alcoholic beverage makers, striking a symbiosis with booze can be crucial to their growth. “The ‘meat market’ analogy is a really good one to use here,” explained Tatyana Dolgaya, brand manager of consumable brands at True Brands, a Seattle-based company whose beverage portfolio includes Collins cocktail mixers and Pinky Up teas. “Recently, we've seen all these trends toward vegan products, like substitutes for meat. Originally, that industry came out as this very niche group that was all about saying ‘no, no, no’ to other things. And sure, there's a market for that, but it's pretty small. We've only seen the meat substitute market take off when it's started to live alongside meat products. We see that now with the Beyond and Impossible products at Burger King and all the fast food chains — it gives the meat consumer the option to comfortably choose either. I think that's how

I see the low alcohol, no alcohol market, too.” Dolgaya also points out that consumers that drink less doesn't necessarily mean they've stopped drinking. “It's why they talk about ‘sober curious’ and not just ‘sober.’ The underlying assumption there is that people are still consuming alcohol, and I don't think that's going away.”

This outlook doesn't necessarily mean beverages that traditionally play nice with booze aren't also courting interest within the no and low sector. One vendor I spoke with pointed out that they deliberately removed wordage that referenced mixing drinks off their packaging. The reason was simple: Their products can be enjoyed as a stand-alone beverage and having labeling language that referenced mixed drinks may obscure this. (Interestingly enough, the vendor also wouldn't allow me to interview him without approval from his marketing team, even though he was the brand CEO. Such approval never came).

It also doesn't mean that the spirits industry won't be completely impervious to the effects of the movement. Even though co-existence is a goal, the consensus was that there will be some market penetration at the expense of some boozy labels. However, this erosion isn't as scary as it seems if you're making artisanal hooch. “I feel like it's not going to make an impact within the craft spirits industry,” said Alicia

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Hollinger, Senior Business Development Manager for Hella Cocktail Company, a premium mixer company in Long Island, New York. "If it was going to make an impact within a type of spirit class, it would be more of your lower quality or lower-end spirits — ones that are more mainstream. For us, we're seeing that people care more about what they're drinking, which means more premium mixes and more craft spirits."

In other words, the brands feeling the pinch will be the bottom shelf value brands that artisan spirits fans and adult beverage geeks routinely mock. Consider all those "booga-booga" articles that tend to wrap their words around millennials and millennial culture, about booze and beyond. These pieces inform us that they're a group that values authenticity in the products they buy. When it comes to spirits, this means they'll put stock in things like quality ingredients and distilling transparency from grain to glass. By this rationale, it stands to reason that millennials making room on their shelves for premium non-alcoholic labels will sacrifice the high-volume, mass-produced stuff and maintain a consumer relationship with craft producers.

It's also important to remember that a healthy chunk of no- or low-alcoholic beverages looking for market penetration are craft producers themselves. As such, they share a common bond with craft distillers seeking to grow their label — not to mention an appreciation for what craft distillers produce. "It makes us feel a little bit better to know when our mixers are used with craft spirits," explained Steve Bargmeyer, director of sales for Collins. "When you're using something that's crafted, it creates a drink that has a feeling of heritage, which is special."

The bottom line: If you're a craft distiller whose nerves get rattled every time you see an article predicting doom and gloom for the booze industry, don't believe the hype. You'll be fine. After two days of walking the Moscone Center floor talking to beverage companies and looking for signs of trouble, it became clear that your no- and low-alcohol beverage brethren revere you, because craft is craft. And if you're still a little freaked out by the way the current market looks, just remember that trends and even movements may lose steam over time, while spirits tend to remain evergreen. "Right now, you got millennials that are out there drinking the White Claws and Trulys of the world," said Bargmeyer. "But as they get older, they'll turn on to wine, more beer, and eventually, mixers and liquors. It's just one of those things that comes around full circle." AS M

*Rich Manning is a freelance food and drink writer based in Fountain Valley, CA. He lives about 15 minutes south of Disneyland, but he hasn't gone there in ages — he'd rather visit the nearby breweries and distilleries instead. You can check out some of his other written hackery by visiting [www.richmanning.com](http://www.richmanning.com). He can be reached at [richmanning72@gmail.com](mailto:richmanning72@gmail.com).*