Taking the drunk out of drinks

Spirit-free cocktails get more sophisticated

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When going out to restaurants, non-drinkers have historically been left on the beverage sidelines, relegated to a choice of sugary sodas and juices, or kitschy classics such as the Shirley Temple.

But as more people opt not to drink — especially Millennials, who have been found to be drinking less alcohol than their parents — new and unique non-alcoholic beverages are showing up on menus.

"It has taken bars and restaurants awhile to catch on to making booze-free cocktails because there used to be a limited demand from customers who were — for a time — happy with their dressed-up soda waters and iced teas," said Gaby Mlynarczyk, a beverage consultant and author of “Clean + Dirty Drinking: 100+ Recipes for Making Delicious Elixirs, With or Without Booze”.

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“Customer palates and needs have evolved: They want to be able to go out to bars and have the same experience as spirited drinkers but without the commitment to recovery the following day,” Mlynarczyk said.

Among the booze-free beverages on the Hearth and Hound menu is the (No)groni, inspired by a Negroni, which is equal parts gin, Campari and red Vermouth. Mlynarczyk’s drink is hibiscus tea infused with the nine botanicals that traditionally go into gin, along with gentian root to give the bitter flavor of Campari and Szechuan peppercorn to mimic the burn of alcohol. Also on the menu is a variation of the Buck or Mule — liquor with ginger beer and lime. Hers is made with carrot juice, curry spices and ginger.

The team at Saxon and Parole, an equestrian-themed restaurant in New York City, is always looking for ways to make everyone feel welcome at its bar, including non-drinkers.

“There are a variety of reasons why people don’t partake in alcohol, and they are just as welcome at our bar,” beverage director Maxime Belfand said. “So we wanted to make sure our list didn’t just have one to two selections for them.”

Belfand’s latest non-alcoholic menu additions include the Spritz, made with Seedlip Spice 94 as well as an alcohol-free vermouth substitute, non-alcoholic bitters, grapefruit and sparkling water; the Ginger and Mint Swizzle, made with ginger-lemon tea, apple cider and mint-agave syrup; and Seedlip and Tonic, with Seedlip Garden 108 and house-made tonic water.

Seedlip, a non-alcoholic distilled spirit made with herbs, spices and botanicals that is available in three different blends, has been showing up on an array of beverage menus.
“Seedlip gives bartenders a new perspective when it come to the world of alcohol, especially with the flavor profile and the types of drinks you can make with it,” Belfand said. “It makes creating non-alcoholic versions of Negronis and Old Fashioneds possible, which is a huge revelation and expander in the world of bartending.”

For Nick Rini, head bartender at Refinery Rooftop at the Refinery Hotel in New York City’s garment district, “a mocktail list is a must-have for any NYC bar worth its salt.”

Rini’s menu includes the POM Rosemary “Mule”, a virgin take on the Moscow Mule made with pomegranate juice, lime juice, rosemary syrup, soda water and Q ginger beer. His Spicy Cucumber Soda is made with cucumber juice, chile tincture, lime juice, simple syrup and soda.

Rini said people who don’t drink, or who are taking time off from drinking, tend to think the bar scene isn’t for them. “This is terrible,” he said. “Because the bar loses revenue, but more importantly, everyone should want to go out and socialize.”
For similar reasons, Chelsea Wood, bar manager at Rare Steakhouse and Tavern in Washington, D.C., created a robust selection of non-alcoholic beverages blending premium ingredients and balanced flavor profiles.

Those include a Virgin Bloody Mary, which is made from a proprietary mix including tomato, lime juice, horseradish and a blend of herbs and spices. It’s garnished with cheese curds, beef jerky, cherry tomato, bleu cheese-stuffed olive, and an Old Bay salted rim, giving it a dramatic appearance.

“We couldn’t neglect our Wisconsin roots,” she said of the cheese curds.

She also offers herbal concoctions such as the Rosemary Sparkler, made with mint, pineapple juice, cranberry juice and tonic water; and the About Thyme, with thyme, lemon juice, cranberry juice and orange juice.

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Some operators may be skeptical about the profit margins on these types of non-alcoholic beverages, but those who’ve been serving them say they sell very well and that the margins are typically better than soda but less than cocktails — although a few say the margins are about the same as alcoholic beverages.

More than just profit-generators, these drinks can be loyalty builders.

“I've found that guests greatly appreciate that we've taken the time to acknowledge their needs and have this option available,” Wood said.

For operators considering adding to their menus similar non-alcoholic beverages, author and bar consultant Mlynarczyk offers this advice:

“Essentially, it should have balance, be limited on cloying sugar and develop on the palate rather than having a flavor that vanishes within the first sip. We aim for it to be as interesting to experience as its boozy counterpart.”

Correction: December 10, 2018

This article has been updated to correct the pronouns used to to identify bartender Nick Rini.