



Mel Babitz, owner of The Open Road bottle shop in Pittsburgh, Pa., carries a wide variety of NA beers and other non-alcoholic adult beverages. PHOTO COURTESY OF THE OPEN ROAD

By Charles Pekow

It's a chilly afternoon in January, and about 300 people have gathered at the Selina Union Market Hotel in Washington, DC for some convivial elbow bending. But the buzz is emanating from the crowd, not the liquid refreshments.

Welcome to the Mindful Drinking Fest, where more than 30 vendors are showcasing products like *Phony Negroni*, a punchless "mocktail"; *Schwäbisches Wiesenobst*, a dealcoholized cider from Germany; and NA beers like *Two Roads Non-Alcoholic American IPA* and *Juicy IPA*, as well as *Untitled Art Mango Dragonfruit Fruited Sour NA*.

Positive Damage, Inc., a company founded by former bar operator Derek Brown, sponsored the sold-out event. He comments, "This is about options. Mindful drinking does not tell you that you should not drink."

At one time, drinking NA beer might stigmatize one as a recovering alcoholic or someone who was ordered off booze by his or her doctor.

But Nielsen IQ, a consumer research firm, states that "82% of non-alcoholic drink buyers are also still purchasing drinks that contain alcohol." They might take part in a "moist" January rather than a dry one. They might restrict drinking to certain nights of the week, or intersperse alcoholic drinks with non-alcoholic ones.

Nielsen attributes the shift to two main factors: the younger set are less interested in alcohol than previous generations, and people today of all ages are more concerned with their health than in previous eras.

"The last holdouts were beer consumers," Brown says. "Beer people are some of the most stubborn people on the planet. ... it's hard for them because some [alco-

hol-free beers] taste watery compared to regular beer."

A New Day for NA Beer

But with better brewing techniques and more styles available (see accompanying article), that's changing rapidly. According to Nielsen, in the year ending last August, sales of non-alcoholic drinks in the United States rose 20.6% over the previous 12 months, totaling \$395 million. And alcohol-free beer accounted for 85.3% of those sales, up 19.5% from the previous year. The company counted 37 new NA beer labels entering the market during that time.

"We normally stock 12-20 different NA beers," says Erika Goedrich, owner of Craft Beer Cellar in Washington, DC, "plus three hopped sparkling waters (Port City's *Hopwell*, Sierra Nevada's *Hop Splash* and Lagunitas' *Hoppy*



Derek Brown, as founder of the company Positive Damage, Inc., promotes "mindful drinking," rather than complete abstinence. PHOTO BY CHARLES PEKOW

Refresh)." Her top-selling NA beers, she shares, are *Free Wave Hazy IPA* and *Upside Dawn Golden Ale*.

Both these beers come from Athletic Brewing, the country's largest dedicated non-alcoholic beer brewer. Its bi-coastal plants in Stratford, Conn. and San Diego are pumping out 150,000 bbl a year. *Inc. Magazine* listed Athletic as the 26th fastest growing private firm in the county for 2022, with 13,071% growth in the last three years.

The company brewed about 75 recipes last year, communications director Chris Furnari says, including seasonals like *Dark & Gourdy*, an alcohol-free pumpkin beer. Athletic's customers skew young: about 75% are between 21 and 45, calculates Furnari. "Unlike traditional craft beer, we have a much more even distribution between males and females, almost 50-50."

Booze-Free Bars and Bottle Shops

Not only are we seeing brewers dedicated to producing NA beer, but we're also seeing bars and bottle shops popping up to support a dry lifestyle.

Gem Well Being Bartique operates two retail outlets in New Jersey, in Pitman and Collingswood, as well as an online Booze-free Bottle Shop & Well-being Boutique (gemlifecollective.com). For \$59, you can buy a Sober Curious Starter Kit that includes, among various "wellness" drinks, a can of *Untitled Art Juicy IPA*.

Drew Davis started Gem as a part-time business part three years ago.

Customers range from eight-year-olds to seniors; many come from Pennsylvania, where stricter laws make it more difficult to find NA beverages. "I can say 70% are women. I don't know why," Davis says. "It may be a stigma about sobriety for men. A lot of women are more open to try to find different drinks to help them unwind instead of alcohol." Among male customers, many want the drinks with CBD.

The pandemic also helped spur interest in non-alcoholic drinks, Davis suggests, as it made people more mindful of their health if they got sick or saw others getting COVID.

Meanwhile, in Pittsburgh, the Open Road Non-Alcoholic Bar + Bottle Shop opened three years ago as a pop-up. A year ago, it found a permanent home. Its website openroadbarpg.com lists a wide variety of NA brews from Atmos Brewing's *Cosmos Peanut Butter Milk Dark* to Two Roots Brewing's *Resin Riot DIPA* to Wellbeing Brewing's *Match Day Light*, a 35-calorie NA English-style pale ale that debuted during the 2022 World Cup.

Founder Mel Babitz recalls, "When I was planning for it, people said to me, 'Why would anybody

want non-alcoholic drinks? What's the point of that? You're never going to make any money without selling alcohol."

In discussing the rise of non-alcoholic beer, she emphasizes the improvement in quality and variety. In stark contrast to a generation ago, when most non-alcoholic beers were pastiches of American pale lagers, brewers have finally figured out how to make other styles like NA stouts and porters.

Philadelphia's Manayunk neighborhood, meanwhile, has The Volstead by Unity, named after the Minnesota Congressman who penned the enabling law for Prohibition. The Volstead offers vegan food and an extensive selection of NA beers from companies like Wellbeing, Partake, Atmos and Grüvi.

Richmond, Va. has Point5RVA, an alcohol-free bottle shop that describes itself as "a safe place where your choices aren't questioned." Beer selections include an NA oatmeal stout called *She's Divine* from Busty Lush, a southern California-based company that's 100% woman-owned. (Founder Laurel Harrop says that she "came up with the idea while pregnant with my second child. I tried several NA beers at the time and was left wanting.")

Jody Sidle, owner of Point5RVA (named after the highest alcohol level that the store sells), comments on her clientele: "My demographic is predominately 21-65: people in recovery, mindful drinkers wanting to switch it up some nights, expectant mothers, people on certain meds, religious regions and many others."

Among her most popular brands are Athletic Brewing's pilot program beers, *Guinness 0* ("which people love"), Atmos, Big Drop and *AI's Lager* from Brooklyn Brewery.

Planned for Washington, DC is the ironically named Binge Bar, an alcohol-free watering hole in the H Street NE business corridor. It had yet to open at press time. Across the Potomac, Umbrella Dry Drinks in Alexandria, Va.'s Old Town neighborhood recently lost its lease and was searching for a new home.

"A Safe Alternative"

As it gains steam, the NA beverage trend is winning praise from even the harshest critics of the alcohol business. "We are encouraged that young adult drinkers are paying attention to the volumes of new research that point to the serious health consequences of consuming alcohol," commented Michael Scippa, director of public affairs for Alcohol Justice (formerly the Marin Institute), which calls itself an "industry watchdog."

"We are also encouraged that Big Alcohol is paying attention too and giving the consumers what they want — a safe alternative."