

# Record-breaking Dry January pushes pubs into low-alcohol future

Alcohol sales have plunged this month – and the change may not just be temporary

James Tapper

It is set to be the driest January in living memory. Drinks sales in pubs and bars have plunged. Rising numbers of people are drinking low or no-alcohol. And new data indicates that even older people are joining teens and twentysomethings by giving up booze. With three days to go, this has been a grim month for publicans.

The British Beer and Pub Association (BBPA) says pubs must adapt quickly by stocking more “lo-no” options and opening their doors more regularly to give community groups a cosy welcome on winter days.

“Most of us want to compensate for our Christmas indulgence and January seems the perfect time to do that,” said Emma McClarkin, the BBPA’s chief executive. “What we want to get across is that we are the hub in the community, we are the heart of the high street, and we’re the place people can go regardless of whether they’re having an alcoholic beverage or not.”

Market researcher CGA tracks drinks sales in pubs and bars every week and in the last fortnight sales have been down by at least 7% compared with last year, with a 19% fall in sales of spirits last week.

The bad weather and the economic climate are partly to blame, but the company’s managing director Jonathan Jones said Dry January was also “making this a hard month for pubs and bars”.

Sales of low and alcohol-free drinks in pubs and supermarkets have spiked in the past year – by June 2023 they were 23% higher than January – and are expected to increase much further as the number of products has increased. The dusty bottle of Kaliber in an unloved corner is gone. Now drinkers can find crisp lagers on draught, IPAs, weissbiers, pilsners, milk stouts and pale ales.

Alcohol Change UK, which began the Dry January campaign 11 years ago, says a record number of people have downloaded its Try Dry smartphone app. And a survey for the BBPA last week showed that almost as many people said they had attempted Dry January this year as in any of the previous 10. Of the 2,230 people sur-

veyed by Find Out Now for the BBPA, 263 (11%) took part and a third of those were doing it for the first time.

Younger people are, perhaps unsurprisingly, giving up drinking in larger numbers, the survey showed. The tendency of generation Z to avoid drugs and alcohol has been documented for years, to the annoyance of some of their redder-nosed elders, and now about a quarter of under 25s do not drink at all, due to rising awareness of alcohol’s effects on health and the fear of drunken exploits being posted on social media.

Yet substantial numbers of older people have also put down their glasses, and one of them is William Chase, the 64-year-old entrepreneur who founded Tyrrells crisps and used to run Chase Distillery.

“I spent 10 years of my life frying crisps, and the next 10 years making spirits,” he said. “I decided to quit alcohol and toxins. Now I feel fantastic – trying to turn the clock back.”

Chase sold his distillery to Diageo in 2020, but said being in that industry meant he had become a “regular” wine drinker. Now he makes Willy’s ACV, a probiotic apple cider vinegar.

“If you’re making alcohol or saturated fat products you get to see what they do. What I do now – it’s not as easy to sell health as it is to sell snacks, but on the conscience side of things [it’s easier].”

Last year 509 pubs shut down and about 6% have gone from the UK in the past six years, according to the BBPA. Some have been closing early or not opening every day due to energy costs and inflation. Others have been sold off for housing.

James Watson, pub protection adviser for the Campaign for Pubs, said that it was now “essential” for many pubs’ survival for them to offer lo-no products. “The places that are stuck with Kronenbourg and Fosters are dying because the sort of people who used to frequent them are gone,” he said. “It’s only people with an income who can still



LEFT Grace Goodlad, proprietor of the Bailey Head in Oswestry, says the pub has always carried a large non-alcoholic range.

afford to do pub-going as a daily routine rather than a luxury.”

Publicans who are adapting say things have generally gone well. Neil Rutherford, who runs the Flying Handbag in Blackpool, was ordering just one case of San Miguel 0% a month last year. “Now I’m ordering one a week,” he said.

The Bailey Head in Oswestry was named pub of the year by the Campaign for Real Ale last year, but proprietor Grace Goodlad said they had “always made a point of a having a large non-alcoholic range”.

“We used to run a range of interesting soft drinks, but since lockdown things have changed,” she said. Companies like Mash Gang realised that people couldn’t sit at home drinking six cans of triple IPA every day. “So they and the other craft heads started to work on a low and no alternative.”

At the Swan Inn in Lewes, Rebecca Allan serves low-alcohol ciders and Guinness Zero as well as lagers. Customers often alternate between stand-

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James Watson, adviser

ard drinks and lo-no – known as zipping or zebra striping. She puts on events such as wreath-making at Christmas and the Southover bonfire society meets there regularly.

It provides some hope that pubs will continue to act as “third spaces” – a place away from home and work where they are part of a community.

Dr Claire Markham, senior lecturer in sociology and criminology at Nottingham Trent University, has researched the impact on communities that lose pubs.

“There’s a narrative that if you’re not going to drink, what’s the point in going to a pub. I think that’s starting to change,” she said.

“Now they’re offering warm hubs, coffee shops, book libraries – there’s much more to them.”