

Sober but Spirited

Dry January may be over, but SA's mocktail trend is just getting started

BY LEA THOMPSON

Spirit-free cocktails may sound like an oxymoron, but for folks looking to embrace a sober lifestyle or even take an occasional break from booze, they're a welcome addition to San Antonio's nightlife and dining scene.

Increasingly focused on mental health and physical wellness, many consumers are backing away from the bottle. The number of people participating in Dry January, an international month-long reprieve from drinking, hit an all-time high this year with one in five polled in a Nielsen study saying they planned to take part.

"I've been drinking less at work myself, and I've seen a push for more options for individuals who are sober or looking to cut back too," said David Naylor, bartender at the Modernist, which is at the forefront of serving up booze-free craft cocktails in San Antonio. "But there's more to this world than cranberry and Topo."

The midcentury-style bar near the Pearl last year launched a monthly Spirit Free Sunday series, turning around liquor bottles for the day to become fully alcohol-free. Every third Sunday of the month, the establishment offers a selection of affordable, zero-proof cocktails that run \$3 to \$9.

That menu is also available during the week to anyone looking to socialize and enjoy a drink without booze.

Inspired by the work of his mentor Julia Momose, a leader of the spirit-free movement in Chicago, Naylor has found a way to create cocktails crafted with technique, fresh ingredients and respect. The idea is to make booze-free drinks as flavorful and aesthetically pleasing as classic cocktails.

Among the the Modernist's spirit-free menu are the Tropical Tweet — a cocktail made with blend from the non-alcoholic spirits maker Seedlip plus booze-free Giffard aperitif. Cold brew, caramel, pineapple and lime



Jaime Monzon

complete the flavor profile. The end result is reminiscent of the Jungle Bird, a classic Tiki drink made with rum.

"I try not to use the word 'mocktail' because it's pejorative in a sense. There's nothing mocking about what we're doing," he said. "We try to use the phrase 'spirit-free', which is more positive. Bars and consumers have been so dependent on liquors for so long, so it's really a new challenge."

According to a 2018 report from Berenberg Research, Americans in their teens and early twenties are drinking 20% less than millennials, who themselves drink less than previous generations. Sober bars have also gained traction in big cities like Chicago and New York.

Advocates say the spirit-free movement welcomes both those in recovery and "sober-curious" folks looking to change the way they consume alcohol, whether to avoiding hangovers or im-

prove their health by imbibing less.

While booze-free bars have yet to take off in San Antonio, local bartenders say they're seeing more visitors take a pass on alcohol while they enjoy nights out.

"On Sundays and Mondays, we see a lot of people who are looking to enjoy themselves without necessarily getting trashed," said Aaron Peña, owner of Squeezebox on the St. Mary's Strip. "Every bar can be a sober bar. It's really about becoming more inclusive."

Peña recently teamed up with Twang — a local brand best-known for its cocktail seasonings and beer salt — to offer new flavorful drinks like the Michenada, a vegan, non-alcoholic drink reminiscent of the beer-based michelada.

Twang is among the growing group of traditionally alcohol-focused brands to offer new, non-alcohol-

ic options. According to IWSR, an analytic leader in the global beverage alcohol market, the U.S. low- and no-alcohol drink industry is poised to grow by more than 18% between 2018 and 2022.

"We've seen that despite the changing market demands and increased interest in sobriety, there's still room for something new," Twang Marketing Director Edmundo Macias said.

In coming months, Twang will launch new products including a mango chile rimmer, which can be used for non-alcoholic or spirited cocktails. The products let it sell to businesses such as coffeeshops, which don't necessarily have liquor licenses.

"People are still into flavor, they're into socializing, but it's a whole new generation that's not necessarily into alcohol," he said. "I don't think this is a trend, I think it's here to stay."