

Showcasing low- and no-alcohol beverages

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Over the past two decades, the proportion of the population that reports drinking alcohol has held steady at just under two-thirds, according to the Gallup Consumption Habits survey. Last year's results were typical: 65 percent of all U.S. adults aged 18 and older say they “have occasion to use alcoholic beverages” while 34 percent say they were total abstainers.

However, what has changed in recent years is the behavior of the drinking majority. A growing number are more mindful about how much and when they drink. They are comfortable deciding not to drink on occasion. It is not a foregone conclusion that drinkers drink every time they visit a restaurant or bar.

Meeting the needs of those consumers is a growing array of low- and no-alcohol beverages that appeal to adult palates with style, nuance and flavor. They are attractive choices for those who refrain on moral grounds, for health reasons or because they are working, driving or have some other reason.

Functionals Rising

Adding color to the conversation about alternative beverages is the growing consumer interest in products that claim to benefit health, wellness or performance—known as

functional beverages.

Products such as probiotic waters and seltzers, energy drinks, kombucha, sports drinks and fortified smoothies address numerous consumer need states and health issues. They claim to be proactive for everything from getting an energy boost to burning fat, managing stress, enhancing memory and tuning immunity. The latter is particularly relevant to consumers who are worried about coronavirus exposure.

Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, 29 percent of consumers say they are consuming more functional foods and beverages, according to The Hartman Group's Functional Food & Beverage and Supplements 2020 report. One -fourth (25 percent) say they are drinking beverages that claim to boost immunity.

These evolutions in consumer behavior mean additional opportunity for operators to promote a beverage program that satisfies multiple needs.

Zeroing Out

One of the most marketable opportunities is the creation of low/no alcohol cocktails that mirror the fresh ingredients, nuanced flavors and stylish presentations of leading craft cocktails. Some operators make their own bases for such drinks from scratch while others choose the consistency and labor efficiency of high-quality prepared syrups, purees, concentrates and shrubs.

Creating spirit-free cocktails for suburban patrons who seek sophistication and flavor—and are careful about drinking and driving—is the task beverage consultant Julieta Campos took on for Table at Crate. The full-service restaurant inside the Crate & Barrel store in Oakbrook Center mall outside Chicago is a partnership between the retailer and Cornerstone Restaurant Group.

Campos' Pretty in Pink is a medley of green tea, sumac-pomegranate syrup and lime juice, shaken and strained over ice with a fresh tarragon sprig. Cucumber Crush, another of her efforts, sports fresh grapefruit and lime juice and demerara sugar syrup, shaken and strained over ice with a cucumber wheel garnish.

“These are thoughtfully made drinks,” says Campos. “You're not stuck with a lemonade or an iced tea or some other afterthought.”

The housemade syrup with sumac and pomegranate juice lends not only vibrant color and fruity, tangy flavor to Pretty In Pink, but also antioxidant and anti-inflammatory properties.

Campos sees a growing number of consumers choosing drinks like that to stay sharp and in command over the course of an active day. “If you’re drinking full-pour cocktails like old fashioned or daiquiris at Saturday brunch, you're out by five or six p.m.,” says Campos.

Frothing Up

In recent years, the introduction of nonalcoholic distilled spirits that simulate the qualities of alcoholic distillates has been a boon for alcohol-free drink creators.

“Just having those nonalcoholic spirits in the arsenal has been huge,” says Ted Rink, beverage director of BLVD Steakhouse in Chicago. “They deliver the texture and some of the essence of alcohol and even a little of the bite.”

His frothy creation, The Champion, is based on a nonalcoholic distilled spirit with citrus, ginger and lemongrass nuances, shaken with pear, ginger, lime and egg white and served in a collins glass.

The Hyacinth, its companion in the BLVD spirit-free section, adds a nonalcoholic spirit that has floral and herbal expressions to green cardamom, grapefruit, cucumber and basil. It too is a frothy shaken drink, but in this case aquafaba, the leftover cooking liquid from chickpeas, rather than egg white, is the frothing agent. Thus it is a vegan offering.

“Sometimes, you just want something that you know is obviously going to be better for you and doesn't have alcohol,” says Rink.

In today’s uncertain and challenging climate, it is essential for operators to capitalize on sales opportunities wherever they can. The growing consumer demand for alcohol alternatives and functional beverages is one of the most viable.