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↑ Young drinkers
enjoying their beers

Unbottling the buzz on low or zero % beers!

What is the current situation of low and no-alcohol beers sales in the UK?
How do breweries view these brands? And will micropubs ever embrace
these particular beers? A special report from **Emma Eversham**

'Dry January' is now back in the cupboard for another year, but whether you embraced, endured or ignored the month when abstinence is now encouraged, the fact remains that the number of consumers who are choosing to cut their alcohol consumption 12 months of the year is increasing.

According to a survey into the UK's drinking habits carried out by the Office for National Statistics (ONS) in 2017, the number of Britons who do not drink alcohol at all has risen by at least 5% in the past decade with 20% of them officially classed as non-drinkers.

And of those who haven't sworn off the booze entirely, there are an increasing number who are

cutting back and seeking low and no-alcohol alternatives on their non-drinking days.

A YouGov survey conducted on behalf of the **Portman Group** in December 2021 found that the number of UK drinkers who 'semi-regularly' consume low and no-alcohol products has risen to one in three (32%) compared to one in four (25%) in 2020.

Drinks industry sales data certainly backs this up: Within the global beverage alcohol market, no and low-alcohol beer and cider, wine and spirits grew more than 6% in volume in the UK, and nine other nations, in 2021 and are now worth around £7.4bn, up from £5.7bn in 2018. →

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“The market wasn’t quite ready for the 2.8% in cask when we launched it, so over the years we’ve reduced the abv so that it’s now 0.5%. We make it using restrictive fermentation and manage it so that it never goes over half a percent of the abv”

Dan Gooderham, Adnams

The study by IWSR Drinks Market Analysis forecasts further growth in the market and predicts an 8% rise in volume sales over the next four years, indicating that ‘lo and no’ is no fad, it’s definitely here to stay.

“While January has become a popular month for people to cut back or abstain from alcohol, interest in no- and low-alcohol drinks has increasingly become a year-round trend among consumers across the world,” says IWSR’s Emily Neill.

“To meet that demand, beverage alcohol companies have invested heavily to introduce a number of innovative new products, and many established mainstream brands have recently crossed over to develop no/low alcohol versions of their popular beer, wines, and spirits.”

Development

One British brewer which has invested in the development of low and no-alcohol beer over the last decade is **Adnams**.

The Suffolk brewer currently brews two 0.5% ABV beers – Sole Star, a light amber ale, and Ghost Ship, a non-alcoholic version of its popular pale ale – at its Southwold site. Sole Star, originally launched in cask at 2.8% in 2013, has been gradually ‘reduced’ to sit at its current 0.5% and is now sold in bottles to on and off-trade.

“The market wasn’t quite ready for the 2.8% in cask when we launched it,” explains Adnams head brewer Dan Gooderham, “so over the years we’ve reduced the abv so that it’s now 0.5%. We make it using restrictive fermentation (using yeast that produces very little alcohol) and manage it so that it never goes over half a percent of the abv.”



↑ Ghost Ship 0.5% accounts for 10% of Adnams brewing sales

While Sole Star marked Adnams’ first foray into low and no-alcohol beers, it hasn’t been its top performer. That position goes to Ghost Ship 0.5% which has become such a success it now accounts for 10% of its brewing sales.

Gooderham says the decision to brew a 0.5% version of its leading brand came as interest grew in low and no-alcohol beers and the technology to make it caught up.

“There were a lot of good breweries out there that do restrictive fermentation so I wouldn’t discredit that method, but we wanted to try and step things on a bit,” he says. “We were looking at the technology and that’s when we decided to invest in the reverse osmosis (the

process of filtering out alcohol but retaining the flavour of the beer) unit.”

Adnams was the first UK brewer to invest in the dealcoholisation plant in 2018 and, as Gooderham explains, it has been a worthwhile one, especially during the rocky trading background caused by the pandemic.

“For our yeast management it’s imperative that we continue to brew,” he says. “Over Christmas our production is traditionally lower and we’d been hit by the uncertainty around the on-trade so we found we were actually relying on Ghost Ship 0.5% to keep our yeast going. It’s fully integrated into our brewing now.” →



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↑ Laura Willoughby

“The increasing variety of high quality low and no-alcohol products available is testament to the sectors’ enormous investment over recent years and commitment to being responsible producers and retailers”

Laura Willoughby, Club Soda

Sussex brewer **Harvey’s** has been a player in the low and no-alcohol market for much longer than Adnams, first launching low alcohol versions of its flagship bitter Sussex Best and its Old Ale in 1988.

The popularity of the low alcohol versions of the flagship brands, which have both been produced by using the reverse osmosis filtration system for the last 30-odd-years, has fluctuated, says Harvey’s head brewer Miles Jenner, but sales look healthy for the foreseeable future. In fact, the Lewes-based brewer is hoping to increase capacity, particularly since its Old Ale won the title Supreme Champion at the International Beer Challenge 2021.

“The problem is that we are into very small production units of processing and it’s difficult to keep up with demand,” he continues, “but we are just doing some work to try and upgrade the plant so we can do that.”

Innovation

While traditional brewers have developed a reliable stream of low and no-alcohol beers, it probably won’t come as much of a surprise that much of the innovation in this area has come from the craft beer sector, alongside some first-time beer producers.

The category may still feel like an after-thought for many micropub owners, but as Laura Willoughby, co-founder of mindful drinking movement **Club Soda** points out, we’ve come a long way from the days when the default non-alcoholic beer option was Kaliber.

Today, there are over 280 low and no-alcohol beers available, ranging from lagers and IPAs to ales and stouts, with leaders in the space including Brew Dog with Nanny State and Punk AF; Lucky Saint, whose unfiltered lager is popular with the on-trade; and multi-award-winner Big Drop, producer of Paradiso Citra IPA and Galactic Milk Stout.

Within the drinks sector as a whole, non-alcoholic beer has also become the default choice for those seeking something alcohol-free. Willoughby says she was a wine drinker before she decided to be teetotal, yet alcohol-free beer is what she’ll opt for most of the time, mainly due to the innovation and high quality of the offering. “Beer has a lot to be proud of in the alcohol-free space,” she asserts.



↑ 5 years in operation and not one non-alcoholic beer sold!

“The quality has changed because the technology has changed, and a lot of work has been done on developing beers. Plus, the most decorated beer company in the whole of Britain is Big Drop. It’s won more awards than any other brewer!”

Willoughby’s view is shared by **British Beer & Pub Association** chief executive Emma McClarkin, who believes the range and quality of non-alcoholic beers in the UK ‘has never been better.’

“With many now available on tap in pubs, they were a perfect option for those taking part in Dry January last month and for those who want to moderate their consumption whilst still enjoying a beer.

“The increasing variety of high quality low and no-alcohol products available is testament to the sectors’ enormous investment over recent years and commitment to being responsible producers and retailers,” she adds.

Quenching the thirst for ‘lo and no’

The stats indicate an increasing thirst for ‘lo and no,’ and brewers are developing products designed to quench it, but is the trend translating into the micropub landscape? Do customers want to drink low and no-alcohol beers at their local?

Angela Morton says demand for non-alcoholic beer at her micropub **Hail to the Ale** in Wolverhampton rose in January, but generally the pub’s offering – Brewdog’s Nanny State and Shandy Bass – is only sought out by ‘the drivers and those who are pregnant.’

“We stock a couple of options for those who can’t drink for whatever reason, but we don’t sell much. We have greater interest in our low ABV cask ales – we have a couple of 3.8% ABVs which do well,” she says.

Steve Williams of **The Frothblowers** in Peterborough can’t recall a customer asking for a non-alcoholic beer since the micropub opened in 2017. Williams does stock alcohol-free wheat beer Erdinger, but he isn’t personally a fan.

While interest has been higher at the recently opened sister micropub **The Thirsty Giraffe** in Deeping St James – two requests for non-alcoholic beers were made in its first week of trade – and growing consumer demand, Williams says he is in no rush to boost his range.

“Most of our customers at The Frothblowers live within a mile of the pub and walk here so aren’t looking for something they can drink because they’re driving,” he continues. “There’s just not been the demand.”

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Steve Williams, The Frothblowers

“I’d be interested in trying something that tastes better, but I just haven’t found it yet and until there’s bigger demand from customers it’s not something I’ll spend much time pursuing.”

While the range of no and low-alcohol beers stocked at **The Royston** in Kent is broader than The Frothblowers and Hail to the Ale (it includes Brewdog’s Punk AF and Nanny State, Lucky Saint, Erdinger and Gadd’s No 11, a 1.2% ABV pale ale made by nearby Ramsgate Brewery) sales don’t match those of its alcoholic counterparts or other non-alcoholic drinks. →

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“The menu didn’t have any alcohol-free beers on it, but when I asked the barman if he had any, he said ‘yes, I’ve got two great alcohol-free beers’ and he went on to describe them with the same enthusiasm as his alcoholic ones. He could have sold more but no-one knew about them because they weren’t on the menu!”

Laura Willoughby, Club Soda

However, owner Andy Smith believes the demographic of his customers and the investment he made in an espresso machine to serve quality coffee to his customers might be contributing to some of the apathy towards alcohol-free beers.

“I serve a lot of coffee in the afternoon as we’ve come to be known for that, which is probably why I don’t sell as much non-alcoholic beer. We do sell more of Gadd’s No 11 than the others, and it has got the interest because it’s local, but we don’t sell loads. There are pubs in other areas of Kent – like Deal and Sandwich – where it might be popular.”

Field of Dreams
Sales of non-alcoholic beer remain low at the aforementioned micropubs, but Willoughby suggests these beers’ lack of visibility could be one reason for low demand.

“They are mainly available in cans and bottles so they’re tucked away on the back bar, not the front bar,” she suggests, recalling how she once saw two people drinking cola in a beer specialist micropub in Cambridge and questioned why they hadn’t ordered a non-alcoholic lager or ale.

“The menu didn’t have any alcohol-free beers on it, but when I asked the barman if he had any, he said ‘yes, I’ve got two great alcohol-free beers’ and he went on to describe them with the same enthusiasm as his alcoholic ones. He could have sold more but no-one knew about them because they weren’t on the menu!”

“I appreciate space is limited in a micropub,” continues Rob Fink, co-founder of alcohol-free craft brewer **Big Drop**, “but like they say in the film *Field of Dreams* ‘if you build it, they will come.’” →



↑ Hardly any non-alcoholic beer sales



↑ Hail to the Ale micropub in Wolverhampton



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↑ Big Drop's James Kindred (l) and Rob Fink

The former city lawyer and friend James Kindred launched Big Drop in 2016 after spying a gap in the market and now produce fourteen alcohol-free beers, from Galactic Milk Stout to tropical IPA Waterslide with a wide range in between.

Fink suggests starting small, 'perhaps have an alcohol-free Big Drop IPA and a stout from one of our competitors in your fridge' but focus on quality above all.

"Micropubs attract discerning drinkers, and a discerning drinker isn't going to be interested in a pretty rubbish mass-produced alcohol-free lager, but if you were to offer them an alcohol-free craft beer that tasted good then it's a winner."

Fink also notes that 80% of Big Drop customers aren't teetotalers, but occasionally want a non-alcoholic option, so encourages micropub owners to bear this in mind, while also factoring in the growing number of non-drinkers when making decisions about what to stock.

"Groups looking for somewhere to drink together will often be led by the non-drinker in their party, so they are more likely to head to a place with a decent low and no-alcohol option," he adds.

Indeed, more people – whether teetotal or cutting back on drinking – are more likely to order low and no alcohol products over soft drinks compared to a year ago. This number has almost doubled to 20% in the last year, according to the Portman Group.

“**Micropubs attract discerning drinkers, and a discerning drinker isn't going to be interested in a pretty rubbish mass-produced alcohol-free lager, but if you were to offer them an alcohol-free craft beer that tasted good then it's a winner**”

Rob Fink, Big Drop

Visibility

As Fink and Willoughby suggest, increasing visibility is key to selling more non-alcoholic beer. However, this is inevitably a challenge when these beers are predominantly available in bottles and cans, not on draft.

As brewers point out, the lack of alcohol makes it much harder to

maintain the quality and safety of low and no-alcohol beers on draft so they haven't been able to offer them as such. Therefore, they don't receive that all-important front bar attention. Of course, lower volume sales of non-alcoholic beers mean it is not always practical for outlets, particularly smaller ones, to stock them on draft either.

Nevertheless, technology is catching up. Big Drop's Citra IPA has been sold on draft in selected outlets since 2019 while Lucky Saint's unfiltered lager has been available on draft since the start of 2020.

Later this year, Heineken 0.0 will be rolled out on tap at hundreds of pubs around the UK following a multi-million-pound investment and a successful 12-week trial last summer, taking 'lo and no' beer into the mainstream.

As James Crampton, Corporate Affairs Director for **Heineken UK**, says, this move could be a 'game-changer' not just for Heineken, but for alcohol-free beers as a whole.

"Heineken 0.0 Draught brings No and Low alcohol beer from the periphery into the mainstream.

We're confident it will, over time, change pubs to accommodate more occasions. And by that, I mean it won't be unusual for people to pop down to their local for an alcohol-free pint or two.

That might sound strange now, but we're confident in the very near future it'll become the norm."

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Low and no-alcohol in figures

'Generation Sober' – According to a YouGov survey of 2,079 adults commissioned by The Portman Group in December 2021, there are 78% of drinkers compared to 22% of non-drinkers. The largest proportion of non-drinkers are those aged 18-34 (70% drinkers vs. 30% non-drinkers) earning this generation the moniker 'Generation Sober'.

£5bn market – If annual sales of low and no alcohol serves matched interest, the market would be worth close to £5bn in the UK according to Club Soda's How Brits are embracing mindful drinking – consumer behaviours on low and no alcohol drinks in the UK report.

Brand loyalty – Consumers appreciate the increased choice and visibility provided by major alcohol producers launching alcohol-free versions of their brands, finds Club Soda's report. Nearly half (44%) of mindful drinkers show some brand loyalty moving from alcohol to low and no. More than one in 10 (12%) have not yet found an alcohol-free version of an alcohol brand they like.

Pub potential – An estimated 7.8 million pints of low and no-alcohol beer were predicted to have been served in pubs during 'Dry January' 2022 according to forecasts by the British Beer & Pub Association (BBPA). The association is expected to release a report on this area later this year. →



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Product round-up

Beavertown Lazer Crush IPA 0.3% ABV

Fruity IPA Lazer Crush joined its alcoholic siblings Gamma Ray, Bones and Neck Oil in October 2020. The brewer uses a new type of yeast that fully ferments the pilsner malt without producing alcohol which also helps provide hints of peach and mango.

Available in 330ml cans.

www.beavertownbrewery.co.uk

Big Drop Galactic Milk Stout 0.5%

The first beer to leave the Big Drop stable in 2016, the Galactic Milk Stout combines barley, lactose, oats, rye, hops, yeast, and cocoa nibs to produce a rich chocolatey stout. Big Drop uses a 'brew-to-strength' method meaning beers are fully fermented without ever rising above 0.5% ABV.

Available in 330ml cans and bottles

www.bigdropbrew.com



Adnams Ghost Ship 0.5%

Like the alcoholic version of the same name, Adnams' Ghost Ship 0.5% is an aromatic and fruity pale ale which is made with locally grown malt and Cascade, Chinook, and Citra hops, before going through reverse osmosis so that just the alcohol is removed, not the flavour.

Available in 330ml cans and bottles.

www.adnams.co.uk

Days Lager 0.0%

Brewed in Scotland, using water from the Lammermuir Hills, locally-grown malted barley, Hallertau hops and maltose, Days uses novel fermentation and cold conditioning techniques that includes a unique double fermentation to produce this light, refreshing lager.

Available in 330ml bottles.

www.daysbrewing.com



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