

# Soft focus

**With more and more diners avoiding the hard stuff, it's time to rethink your non-alcoholic drinks selection and take advantage of the fact that most diners are willing to pay a premium for high-quality, carefully sourced softs**

Words/Fiona Griffiths

**T**hese days, just a glass - or none - at lunchtime will do, and it's often the same when it comes to the evening, with some people avoiding alcohol because they're driving, for health reasons or simply because they don't feel like it. In fact, according to research, as much as a third of all customers (excluding children) are not looking for alcohol when they visit a bar or restaurant.

This problematic shift in consumer behaviour is well documented and widely accepted by restaurateurs, but look at some soft drinks offerings and you'd think the industry was back in the glory days of diners stumbling back to the office at 4pm

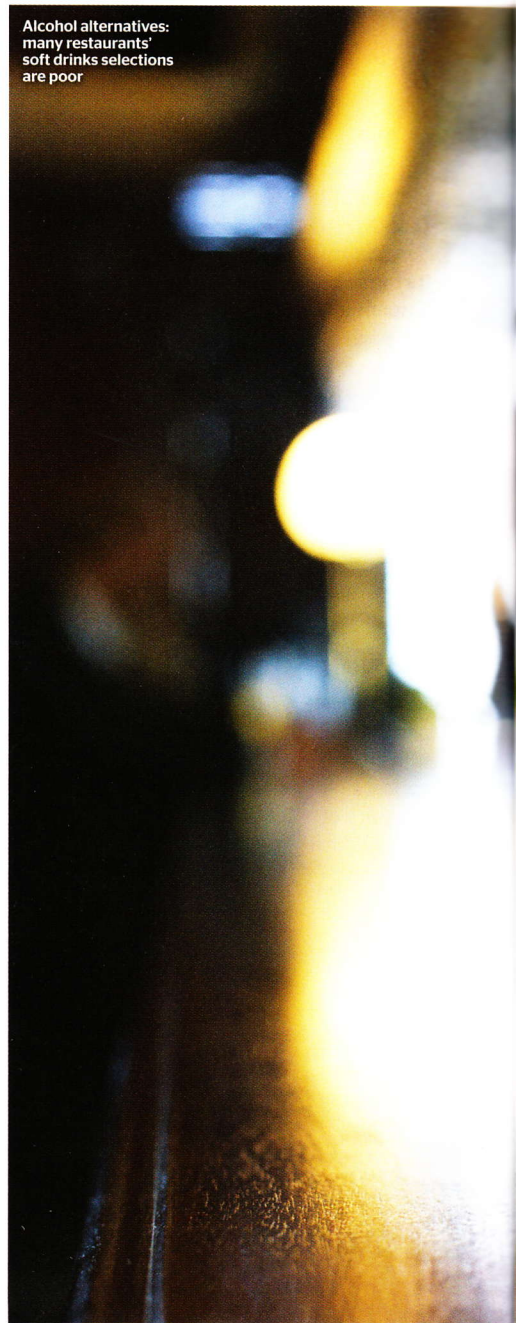


after a three-hour epic lunch. Many restaurants' selections of soft drinks are woefully inadequate - a small selection of mass market fizzy drinks and perhaps a few juices.

Diners are willing to pay a premium for high-quality products and, as such, the adult soft drinks market is enjoying a period of rapid expansion. Restaurants can now choose from a vast range of products when creating soft drink menus so there's really no excuse for stocking a dull selection of non-alcoholic tipples. And if you don't want to serve ready-made soft drinks, you can always join the growing band of restaurants that make their own juices, non-alcoholic cocktails and sodas.

Scott Macdonald, managing director of fast-expanding restaurant chain Bill's, believes a combination of home-made and

Alcohol alternatives:  
many restaurants'  
soft drinks selections  
are poor







packaged is the best policy. "We think it's very important to offer a high-quality and diverse range of soft drinks, although they are not necessarily aimed at adults and can be enjoyed by all ages," he says. "We have a mix of fresh juices and smoothies, as well as some more 'adult' soft drinks, such as cream soda with rhubarb, botanical ginger beer and our own Bill's pink lemonade. The selection of soft drinks needs to be a good balance, much like a wine list, and naturally flavoured - no nasties - is very important."

Fredi Viaud, head bartender at Charlotte's Bistro in Chiswick, takes a similar view. He offers Fever-Tree's tonic water and ginger ale, alongside home-made juices and cocktails.

"In my opinion, adults not wanting to drink alcohol need to have as extensive a selection to choose from as those who do. It's very easy to

*People are definitely expecting a higher quality now as awareness of seasonality and provenance increases*

stick to the staples - sodas and fruit juices - but I feel strongly that there should be a more interesting offering for anyone not drinking [alcohol]," says Viaud.

"We focus on creating juices and purées that emulate the kitchen in their seasonality. I have found that guests are both surprised, and really pleased, that we have taken so much time and care to create our soft drinks. People are definitely expecting a higher quality now as awareness of seasonality and provenance increases."

#### *More elegant imbibing*

At Rawduck, in Hackney, every soft drink on the menu is made in-house, and co-owner Clare Lattin says customers are increasingly happy to pay more for such hand-crafted creations.

"We care enormously about our food menu



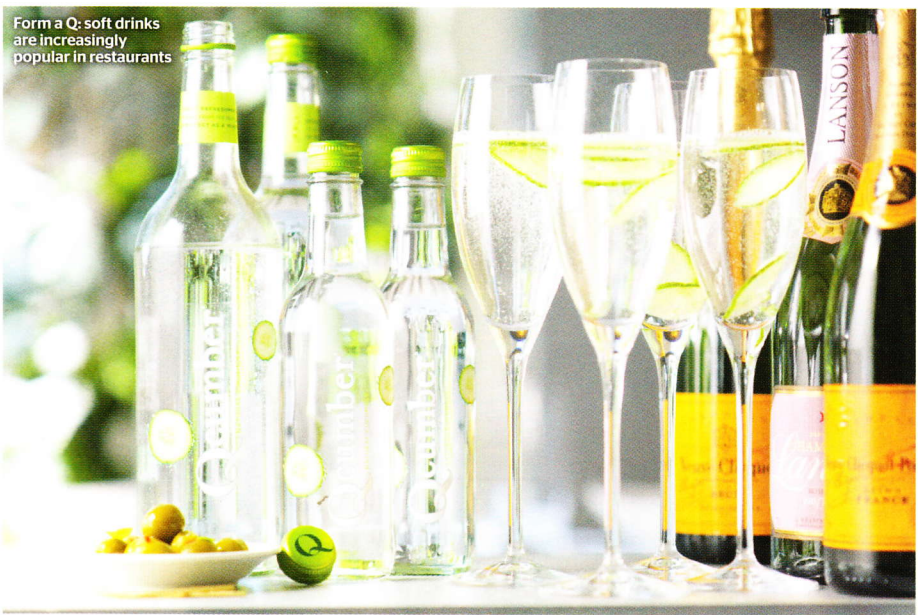
and our drinks menu is no different: we make all our own soft drinks, using seasonal ingredients and keep them healthy and delicious.

“Often packaged drinks are packed with sugar and end up being very overpowering in flavour. Soft drinks should be more subtle, perhaps more elegant if you like.”

It's not surprising that Rawduck's customers find its drinks range intriguing because the mainstay of the menu is fruit-based drinking vinegars such as rhubarb and vanilla, hot apple cider vinegar, black cherry, spiced quince, and lemon and thyme soda.

Lattin explains: “We were researching the history of fermentation and health, and discovered that unpasteurised vinegar used to be drunk to aid digestion, as well as to preserve fruits to make a cocktail base. So we took that idea and played with it, while also looking more at the wealth of seasonal ingredients and spices on our menu that could be used to make soft drinks. Spice in soft drinks is a really interesting way to go when you are looking at bringing down sugar content. We change the range whenever something new comes into season and we think it is interesting. Through the summer we had lots of berry-based vinegars, for example.”

Marcus Wareing's Covent Garden restaurant Tredwell's also adopts a home-made approach, although it has just started using cold-pressed, organic juices from BoBo's Juicery as a base for its non-alcoholic (and alcoholic) cocktails. “I guess we refer to these as non-alcoholic cocktails, rather than soft drinks, due to the negative connotations associated with soft drinks - that being full of sugar and E-numbers,” says group operations director Chantelle Nicholson. “We like to offer guests who are unable to drink alcohol something a bit more



Form a Q: soft drinks are increasingly popular in restaurants



interesting than fruit juice or the standard soft drinks. It's similar to the dishes we create that are allergen free. I don't think it's right when some people have to miss out, especially given cocktails are becoming a lot more popular, so there needs to be an alternative that is just as well thought out and tasty.”

**Packaged products**

So what are the options if you want to go down the packaged route but don't want to compromise on quality?

Qcumber - a lightly sparkling cucumber infused drink - has been proving a big hit in the on-trade since its launch in 2012, and has now been joined by a cucumber and mint variant.



## THE INSIDER

**Luke Benson**  
on-trade marketing manager, Fever-Tree

**What should operators consider when choosing a selection of mixers?**

There's more choice now than ever before, so it's important for operators to take pride in their mixer offering. It's no longer seen as a secondary thought and it's a great source of added revenue. Customers are taking much more care about what they consume and won't settle for an artificially sweetened, bad-tasting option. The importance of high-quality ingredients has never been greater, and Fever-Tree has always sourced the very best.

**Is the market for more mature mixers growing?**

As pioneers of this category, we've seen, in recent years, a number of brands that have followed suit. It's solid proof that consumers

are looking for a better alternative. Premium gin sales grew by 23% in 2013 in the UK alone, so an increase in demand for premium tonic must naturally follow - Fever-Tree's global sales were up 41%. The G&T is a quintessential British drink and 75% of it is tonic, so it should be the best.

**How should operators market mixers at a time of year when guests are usually drinking less alcohol?**

We take pride in the fact that all of our mixers are good enough to be drunk alone, without the addition of alcohol. Our ginger range, for example, is perfect for people who don't want to drink but still want to

enjoy the social side of going out. A range of non-alcoholic cocktails can really boost mixer sales and these can be created with as little as a splash of bitters and a squeeze of lime.

**Can we expect any new products from Fever-Tree this year?**

We continually strive to lead the premium tonic category, which means we're always exploring new options to extend the range. As of yet, nothing's been confirmed, but innovation is a key part of any business and something that we always keep in mind.



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**Restaurants that don't offer a good range of high-quality soft drinks for adults are missing a trick**

Creator Graham Carr-Smith says: "Many people prefer to avoid highly carbonated products when eating out and are looking for something that actually complements their meal rather than competes with their taste buds for attention. Qcumber has a subtle, yet distinctive, cucumber taste which both refreshes and cleanses the palate, so it's perfect for food occasions."

Heartsease Farm fruit pressés - launched last year in response to the growing demand for better quality soft drinks - offers six flavours of fruit pressés (including elderflower, raspberry lemonade, British blackcurrant crush and fiery ginger beer), all made using pressed juices and spring water from the farm on the Welsh borders.

And Kingsdown Water, in Kent, has also just launched a new range of sparkling pressés made from natural juices in five flavours: elderflower, rhubarb, lemon, orange and apple.

Belvoir Fruit Farms saw sales of its fruit pressés and cordials grow by more than 20% in 2014, with its 25cl pressés - particularly elderflower, ginger beer, raspberry lemonade and handmade lemonade - proving popular in the on-trade.

"Restaurants that don't offer a good range of high-quality soft drinks for adults are missing a trick, not just in failing to maximise sales by offering something people are prepared to pay a bit more for, but in not giving their outlet a point of difference," says Belvoir managing director Pev Manners. "It may be that a restaurant could also find multiple uses for a good-quality cordial, which would make it even better value. Our elderflower cordial can be sold with soda or sparkling water, used in cocktails, and also in

dessert recipes in the kitchen."

With modern consumers becoming increasingly health conscious, it's perhaps no surprise the market has seen a rise in demand for healthier alternatives to high sugar options, with aloe vera drinks having now become the fastest growing 'functional drink' category in the UK, according to analyst IRI.

Funnybones Foodservice, for example, has just launched Grace Aloe Vera Refresh Drinks, which are available in original, strawberry and mango flavours.

Customers celebrating a special occasion, who don't want to drink alcohol, can still feel like they're having a special treat with Luscombe Drinks' new Damascene rose bubbly - 'a delicate champagne alternative' made from muscat grape juice, Damascene rose water and Sicilian lemon with sparkling spring water.

Last year Appletiser expanded its range to include more premium ingredients. Its apple and pomegranate variant was developed in response to research from brand owner Coca-Cola that showed consumers were demanding products with more varied flavours, such as pomegranate. The new variant was first launched in the on-trade, demonstrating the importance of the eating out sector for soft drink producers.

SHS Drinks' Schloer brand, meanwhile, includes two 'celebration lines' - a pink fizz and a white bubbly - which have higher carbonation levels and come in 750ml glass bottles with a popping cork closures complete with a wire cage encapsulated in foil.

For those who want to further the impression that they're drinking alcohol, products like BrewDog's alcohol-free Nanny State craft beer,

and Kopparberg's new strawberry and lime cider (which joins its existing alcohol-free pear, and blackcurrant and raspberry flavours) are a good way to go.

### Seasonal changes

High-quality, not-from-concentrate juices and smoothies in interesting flavours are another way to give a soft drinks offer a point of difference.

Pago offers a range of 13 fruit juice flavours vacuum packed for freshness and with no artificial additives or preservatives.

Marvin Henshaw, UK manager for Pago, says: "Just as there are seasonal specials on your food menu, why not ring the changes with seasonal fruit juices? In Italy, France and Spain, they embrace flavours other than the ubiquitous orange and apple, so consider flavours like Pago's new cloudy cherry and blackcurrant in the winter, and switch to strawberry, peach and classic English fruits in the summer."

Fruit smoothies, whether bought from a juice bar or a supermarket, are another growth area, and it's easy to make them for your customers using Love Taste's frozen pouches of puréed, sliced and diced fruits and vegetables.

Pub chains like All Bar One and Harvester are now using the pouches to create smoothies, with Love Taste's biggest sellers being 'Broccoli and the Beast' - broccoli, spinach, celery, mango, pineapple and banana - and 'Pash 'n' Shoot' (passion fruit, pineapple and mango).

"Pub regulars have seen an explosion in artisan beers and ciders, but the soft drinks market hasn't moved on behind the bar for years, despite the huge range on the high street," says founder Richard Canterbury.

"How disappointing is it to serve delicious, locally sourced steak alongside a super sweet fruit juice that is full of artificial ingredients, colours and sugar?"

"It's time pubs and restaurants mirrored what's happening across the country, from juice bars to supermarkets." ■

