





Wine Not

In a time of warning studies about alcohol consumption, Paola Westbeek looks at non-alcoholic wines, how they taste and if they pair with food

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IF THERE'S ONE THING I look forward to come Friday evening, it's ringing in the weekend with a well-prepared meal and the celebratory "pop" of uncorking a fine bottle of wine. Everything, from thinking about what I'm going to make, to buying the wine and that moment when I swirl, sniff and delight in that much-anticipated first sip, brings me an incredible amount of joy. To me, the gustatory symphony created by the marriage of food and wine is one of life's greatest pleasures. And yet here I am, wondering if I should curb my consumption after reading yet another study about the dangers of alcohol.

According to a report published by global marketing intelligence agency Mintel last year, "over half of UK consumers aged 18-34 worry about the effect of alcohol on their emotional wellbeing, and over two-thirds of all alcohol drinkers have the same concern." I'm glad I'm not alone. Truth be told, however, except for professional wine tastings—in the company

of a spittoon reminding me this is work—I don't drink all that much. A glass of wine or scotch on the rocks on the couch after a hard day? Not my thing. Cocktails with friends? I'd rather stay home with a book and a cup of tea. My alcohol consumption is pretty much limited to those weekend wine indulgences or dinners out. Nevertheless, I was curious about all the buzz that buzz-free wines are stirring up these days and wondered if things had

I tried. I really did, but when it came to de-alcoholised wines, I did not find any that were worthy of pairing with food. Rather than elevating the dining experience by complementing or balancing the flavours in a dish, their lack of complexity, both on the nose and palate, left me feeling a little deceived. Especially if clever marketing tactics (like a handsome bottle) conveyed otherwise. In fact, the sad truth is that some wines took

SAVVY WINEMAKERS ARE RESPONDING TO THE DEMAND FOR NON-ALCOHOLIC WINES

improved since the last time I bought a bottle of alcohol-free merlot (which was nothing more than watered down grape juice).

Savvy entrepreneurs and winemakers around the world are responding to the demand for non-alcoholic beverages. In the UK alone, more than 200 companies are making non-alcoholic tipples. After chatting with a sommelier, who was responsible for creating alcohol-free wine pairings for a three-Michelin-starred restaurant (offered at the same price point as the regular pairing), I felt reassured and ready to embark on some experimental sipping.

on highly unappealing nuances of dirty mop or dishwasher when paired with food.

Why could that be? The answer is simple. Remove the alcohol and out go the aromatic qualities and structure that make a wine, well, a wine. A better option for those who would rather abstain would be to pair food with drinks like kombucha or tea, which, surprisingly, have interesting flavour profiles that can complement dishes beautifully without claiming to be something they're not. That being said, there are non-alcoholic wines that are delightful to drink on their own, provided you don't approach them with



wine-coloured glasses. The UK brand Noughty, for example, crafts a sparkling organic chardonnay with a delicate bubble and an uplifting minerality, making it a lovely apéritif or non-alcoholic toast. Equally pleasant was the sparkling rosé from Kolonne Null, a fresh and fruity pale pink sip perfect for picnics or as a beachside refreshment. While most of the non-alcoholic reds I tried were either too sweet or too insipid, Leitz's pinot noir, Natureo's grenache-syrah and Moderato's merlot-tannat were quite palatable with some chilling, a few ice cubes and a slice of orange (a crime if done to real wine).

Interestingly, non-alcoholic beers can sometimes work with food. Take the San Miguel 0,0 Tostada, for

example. This well-balanced amber lager with hints of caramel and toasted notes is great on its own, but pairs well with grilled vegetables or lightly spiced dishes. Also deserving of some praise is the non-alcoholic gin crafted by the French brand, Sober Spirits. With warm hints of almond, aromatic botanical notes and zesty citrus, it not only made for a highly convincing G&T experience, but was a great match with spicy vegetable samosas.

While the detrimental effects of excessive alcohol use cannot be undermined and the shift towards mindful drinking should be encouraged, non-alcoholic wines, in my opinion, still haven't quite earned their place at the table yet. ■



Chelsea Flower Show

The RHS Chelsea Flower Show, known as the world's greatest flower show, takes place at the Royal Hospital Chelsea from May 21 to 25

This year is set to be the greenest Chelsea Flower Show yet, using eco-techniques, low carbon materials and processes to reduce impact and waste

Every garden at the show will have a final relocation where communities around the country will be able to enjoy the beautifully designed spaces

Gemma Lake, Chelsea Show Manager says, "We are proving that great design and sustainability go hand in hand"

SOURCE: RHS.ORG.UK