

NON-ALCOHOLIC SPIRITS AND ALCOHOL ALTERNATIVES AT THE COOP

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By Juliet Kleber

At a recent dinner out, I spent \$12 on a “mocktail,” specifically, a zero-ABV Yuzu Ginger Fizz. Throughout the past decade my body has started to respond less and less favorably to even small amounts of alcohol. So, while I love a great cocktail, the decision to get one is always a process of weighing long-term and short-term happiness. And when I see a or low- or no-ABV drink list on a menu, it feels like a treat. This particular drink was refreshing and complex, not overly sweet, as many alcohol alternatives tend to be. And though \$12 dollars is more than I like to spend on a drink, it’s become commonplace as the variety and sophistication of alcohol alternatives has proliferated over the past few years.

Part of the price of that particular drink was its key ingredient: Seedlip Grove 42, a

popular non-alcoholic spirit and one of several you might have noticed at the Coop. Grove 42 is described by its manufacturer as “a sophisticated, bright, citrus blend of Mediterranean orange, lemon peel, lemongrass and ginger with a dry finish,” and it’s one of four blends Seedlip makes, two of which you can find on the top shelf of the Coop’s fancy foods end cap (which is across from the chicken case).

Seedlip is only one in an array of high-end non-alcoholic spirits, aperitifs and other alcohol alternatives you can find there, and it was a pioneer in the booming market of no- or low-alcohol drinks that grew 31% in 2023 alone (according to consumer intelligence firm NielsenIQ). And, as in the rest of the country, their popularity at the Coop has risen rapidly in the past few years.

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RECEIVING COORDINATOR KUSI MERELLO

In an interview with the *Gazette*, Receiving Coordinator Kusi Merello noted, “Before the pandemic, [the trend] started to get big, but [after] the pandemic it’s gotten really intense.” The Coop had always stocked some non-alcoholic beers, she and fellow Receiving Coordinator/Buyer Britt Henriksson explained, but the game changer was Athletic Brewing’s line of alcohol-free craft beers. Their cans (previous options had only been bottled) produced much more excitement and visibility at the Coop—today, canned non-alcoholic beer has its own permanent home in aisle 3. And with the pandemic, Athletic’s popularity surged, as did the overall demand for alcohol alternatives and the selection of available options.



“From what I’ve read,” Henriksson said, “people felt like they were consuming too much alcohol at the start of the pandemic.” And while non-alcoholic beer remains the most popular choice (the same is true nationally), Coop members started asking for the newer herbal and botanical products around that time as well.

Seedlip and Ghia (a non-alcoholic aperitif) were two of the products that came in by member request. “Slowly, we were getting a lot more recommendations for the whole spectrum of drink options from mixers to liquor,” Merello said. In addition to those already mentioned, you might find Lyre’s on that top shelf, a producer of a full range of alcohol-free spirits, including whiskey, gin and tequila alternatives. There’s also Kin Euphorics, which purports to use “nootropics and adaptogens” to improve mood and offer cognitive benefits. The Coop now carries dealcoholized wines and a selection of canned, pre-mixed mocktails as well.

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Unlike the non-alcoholic options of the past, most of these products are not necessarily targeted to people who abstain from alcohol entirely. They're marketed as an alternative "adult beverage" for people who may want to reduce their alcohol intake (often for health reasons), for people like myself who only drink in small quantities, or for people (especially younger members of Gen Z) who are just not that interested in consuming alcohol. According to the same Nielsen report, 82% of non-alcoholic beverage consumers are still buying alcoholic drinks as well.

And while old-school mocktails made from juices and syrups were less expensive due to their lack of alcohol, the same can't be said for those featuring non-alcoholic spirits. A 700 milliliter bottle of Seedlip retails for \$31.99. A bottle of Ghia goes for \$38 on their website—it's currently \$32 at the Coop, comparable to the price of a bottle of traditional aperitif. This is partly due to the complexity of the alcohol-free distillation process and the fact that, as niche products, they must still be produced at relatively small scale. Some of those brands embrace the price-point as appropriate to a more sophisticated, artisan product.

And across the board (wines, beers, spirits and mixed drinks alike) these offerings are becoming more sophisticated—on their own terms, or as approximations of their traditional counterparts. "The [de-alcoholized] wines usually taste like juice to me," Henriksson said, "but we shared a sample in the office of the brand I brought in last week (Noughty), and it tasted more like what a wine would taste like."

The sales of these products at the Coop tend to follow the same curve that traditional alcoholic beverages do. They sell more in the summer and around the holidays—the times that people are often gathered in groups, drinking socially. With one notable exception: at the time of this writing, we're halfway through "Dry January," a month--

long break from alcohol that millions of Americans participate in (though many do not complete it).

During this time, there's a notable bump in sales of alcohol alternatives—helped in part by a display on the seasonal end cap (which is across from the eggs and tofu case). “Featuring it on the display makes everyone aware of it, whereas the gourmet end cap is usually [stocked for] people who seek [a product] out or ask for it,” Merello said.

According to the coordinators, St. Agrestis's Phony Negroni is always the most popular option at the Coop in this category, but it's been selling especially briskly this month,

“It's insane how much people are buying,” Merello said. The brand makes three “cocktail dupes”: Phony Negroni, Phony Mezcal Negroni, and Amaro Falso, all of which the Coop carries. “I ordered four cases of each last week, three cases this week, and I'll probably have to order more,” said Henriksson, “And they're huge cases.”



“There’ll probably be a new drink trend in two years that people will make a non-alcoholic version of,” she added, “but people are really digging these now.”

The popularity of individual products does wax and wane, so the selection rotates according to demand, as well as the inevitable issue of space on the Coop’s packed shelves. “It’s a balance between the people who like their regular things and the people who always want to try new things,” said Merello. And the Coop is always responding to new trends and member requests too: sparkling hop waters are a recent addition that have gotten good feedback.

But the general trend is clear: alcohol alternatives are not just for Dry January, and they’re not going away any time soon. “It’s pretty unreal,” Merello said, “Even super major brands have non-alcoholic versions. They’ve seen the trend and they’re getting on board.”



PHOTO BY CHRISTIAN DIAZ

Juliet Kleber is a writer, editor, and musician based in Bed-Stuy. She joined the Coop in 2021 and always comes home with too much cheese.