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Young Adults Are Redefining the Night Out

A global shift toward low-alcohol and zero-proof drinks is reshaping bar culture, from afternoon aperitifs to earlier dinners.

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Young adults around the world are changing when they drink, what they drink and how much they want alcohol to shape a night out.

The shift is most visible among Generation Z and younger millennials, who are increasingly choosing low-alcohol drinks, fermented beverages and zero-proof alternatives over the high-proof cocktails and late-night bar crawls that defined earlier youth drinking culture. In place of the traditional nightcap, many are opting for what some hospitality operators now call a daycap: an earlier drink after work, at brunch or in the afternoon, with enough time left for dinner, sleep and the next day’s obligations.

The change is being driven by a mix of health concerns, cost pressures and a broader rethinking of social life. Surveys cited by beverage analysts and public health groups show that many young adults now see alcohol less as a social necessity than as something to be managed carefully. They are more likely than older generations to say alcohol harms their health, interferes with sleep and affects mental well-being. At the same time, inflation and higher menu prices have made full-strength cocktails harder to justify, especially in major cities where a single drink can cost $20 or more.

That has helped fuel demand for drinks that offer flavor and ritual without as much alcohol. Vermouth has reemerged as a standalone drink rather than just a cocktail ingredient. Hard teas and hard kombuchas have moved from niche products into mainstream ready-to-drink shelves. Functional nonalcoholic beverages infused with botanicals, adaptogens and other mood-oriented ingredients have also found an audience among consumers who want something that feels social but does not leave them impaired.

The trend is not limited to one region. In Britain and the United States, younger adults are increasingly choosing earlier evenings out and shorter drinking occasions. In Spain, the afternoon drinking culture known as tardeo has gained ground with younger people who want to socialize over tapas and drinks without staying out late. Across the Mediterranean, aperitivo culture has also benefited from the preference for lighter drinks that can be sipped slowly before dinner.

In East Asia, the shift has been especially pronounced because it runs against older workplace drinking norms. In China, younger consumers are pushing back against banquet culture centered on baijiu and other strong spirits. Many now prefer fruit wines, tea-based alcohol and sparkling low-alcohol drinks. In South Korea, where after-

work drinking once played a central role in corporate life, liquor shipments have fallen sharply from their peak several years ago, while sales of zero-proof beer and low-sugar drinks have risen. Convenience stores, restaurants and beverage companies have responded by expanding smaller bottles, lower-ABV products and zero-sugar versions aimed at younger buyers.

Japan has long had a head start on this market through chuhai, a canned drink built around shochu and soda or fruit flavors that usually stays in the 3% to 7% ABV range. Its popularity reflects a broader preference for sessionable drinks that can be consumed over time without leading quickly to intoxication. That same logic now shapes products across markets: consumers want something refreshing, portable and easy to pace.

The beverage industry has adapted quickly. Producers are reformulating drinks with less sugar, smaller serving sizes and more botanical flavor. Bars are offering miniature cocktails at lower prices. Brands are leaning into packaging that looks premium enough for social media but signals moderation rather than excess. Some companies are even marketing drinks around specific moods or functions, promising relaxation, focus or social ease without alcohol’s side effects.

Public health researchers say the appeal of these products should not be mistaken for abstinence alone. Many young adults still drink alcohol; they simply want more control over when and how they do it. Temporary abstinence campaigns such as Dry January have become common entry points for people testing their habits without committing to permanent sobriety. Studies of emerging adults in the United States suggest that participation in these challenges often leads some people to cut back overall or stop drinking altogether.

Social pressure remains part of the picture. Even as moderation becomes more acceptable, many young adults still report feeling pushed to drink at gatherings. Some say they worry about being judged if they order a nonalcoholic beverage. Others describe hiding their choice from friends or alternating alcoholic drinks with water or zero-proof options to avoid standing out. That behavior has become common enough to have its own name in some markets: zebra striping.

For bars and restaurants, the change is forcing a rethink of service hours and menus. Reservations are moving earlier in the evening. Outdoor seating, brunch service and daytime events are becoming more important. Operators say younger customers often want an experience built around food, conversation or an activity rather than drinking alone as the main event.

The result is a beverage market that looks different from even a few years ago. Alcohol is still present, but it is increasingly treated as one option among many rather than the center of social life. For producers of vermouth, hard tea, kombucha, tepache-inspired drinks and nonalcoholic aperitifs, that shift has opened new business opportunities. For bars and restaurants, it has changed what counts as a successful night out: not necessarily more alcohol sold after dark, but more people staying longer earlier in the day with drinks they can enjoy without losing control of the evening ahead.