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# RTD sales outpace vodka globally

Spirits companies rush to capture demand for canned cocktails, spritzes and other portable drinks

Thursday, May 28, 2026



The ready-to-drink alcohol category is emerging as one of the few clear growth engines in global beverage alcohol, and spirits companies are moving quickly to claim a share of it, even as the market remains uneven and difficult to navigate.

According to data from IWSR, RTD volumes rose 3% in 2025 while most other major alcohol categories declined. The category has grown at a compound annual rate of 8% since 2019 and is expected to keep expanding, though at a slower 2% annual pace

through 2030. By value, RTDs overtook vodka globally in 2025, a sign of how quickly consumer demand has shifted toward canned cocktails, spritzes and other portable drinks.

Luke Tegner, global head of consulting at IWSR, said the opportunity was too large for spirits companies to ignore, but he warned that success depends on making careful choices about product design, branding, pricing and distribution. He said the category is not growing evenly across all formats. Spirits-based RTDs continue to gain ground, while malt-based products are losing share. Innovation is also slowing as companies focus more on spirit-based variants, premium price tiers and higher-alcohol offerings.

That shift has made occasion more important than ever. RTDs appeal to consumers because they are convenient, portable and consistent, but those traits alone no longer guarantee sales. Brands now have to decide whether they are aiming at at-home aperitif drinking, outdoor social gatherings, pre-party occasions, casual meals, festivals, sports viewing or more premium cocktail moments. Tegner said each of those settings can require a different alcohol level, package size, price point, sales channel and brand message.

The category is also gaining traction in bars and restaurants. In the United States, the share of spirit-based RTD volume sold on-premise rose from 6% in 2020 to 14% in 2024 and is projected to reach 17% by 2029, according to IWSR’s US Spirit-based RTD Report 2025. That growth reflects consumer demand for easy-to-serve cocktails in settings where speed and consistency matter.

Brand strategy remains another challenge. Some of the strongest RTD launches have come from companies outside traditional spirits businesses, including soft drink brands and celebrity-backed labels that have found favor with younger drinkers. IWSR’s RTDs Strategic Study 2025 found that 59% of RTD buyers said they were more likely to buy from a familiar brand, while 52% said the same about well-known spirits brands. But nearly half of consumers did not see brand familiarity as a major factor.

That creates risk for spirits companies that extend existing brands into RTDs. IWSR research suggests these products are often seen as fun and appealing trial items, but they can also weaken a brand’s premium image or special-occasion appeal if handled

poorly. Tegner said spirits companies should not assume an RTD will serve as a bridge to their core bottles. He said RTD consumers want a good RTD first and do not necessarily want to be moved into another product line.

Market selection is just as important. The category remains fragmented, with most leading brands succeeding in only one or two countries. Local tastes and drinking habits still shape demand more than global brand power does. Hard seltzers and hard teas have drawn many beer drinkers into the category, which means some launches may need to target consumers coming from beer rather than from spirits.

The move away from malt-based products has helped spirits companies. In 2025, global malt-based RTD consumption fell 5%, while spirits-based RTD volumes rose 7%, according to IWSR. The shift has been especially visible in the United States and Mexico. In markets such as Germany and Japan, malt-based RTDs have little presence.

Vodka remains the most common base across age groups, but younger consumers show different preferences. Gen Z buyers lean toward tequila, while millennials favor whisky, naturally fermented bases, brandy or Cognac and mezcal. Even so, consumer understanding of what is inside many RTDs remains limited. IWSR found that many buyers of flavored alcoholic beverages and hard tea products could not identify the base spirit in their drinks, especially among older consumers.

Flavor continues to drive purchase decisions more than any other factor across age groups, according to Susie Goldspink, head of RTD insights at IWSR. Price ranks second and matters more to older buyers, while younger consumers are more likely to respond to packaging design and functional health claims.

Among flavors, lemon-lime remains the leading choice for new launches. It gained share again in 2025, helped by new Margarita-style products that built on familiar citrus profiles while fitting into the broader demand for easy cocktail formats.