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Britain’s Airlines Push to Curb Airport Drinking

Carriers seek tighter alcohol limits at airports to reduce disruptive behavior and costly flight diversions.

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Airlines in Britain are weighing tighter limits on alcohol sales at airports, including possible restrictions on early-morning drinking, as they try to curb disruptive behavior on flights and the costly diversions that can follow. The debate has put a familiar part of travel culture under pressure: the pre-flight drink, long treated by many passengers as the start of a holiday.

Dan Harwood, managing director of the German sparkling wine company Schloss Wachenheim and a wine expert, said the ritual remains deeply rooted for many British travelers. “For millions of Brits, the holiday starts at the airport bar,” he said in comments to The Drinks Business. “Whether it’s a pint before dawn or a glass of prosecco before boarding, the pre-flight drink has become part of the modern travel experience.”

But Harwood also said the tradition is “facing turbulence” as airlines including Ryanair, EasyJet and Jet2 push for tighter controls on airport alcohol sales after a rise in disruptive passenger incidents onboard. He said airline staff are dealing more often with drunken behavior in the air and that diversions caused by unruly passengers are expensive, stressful and potentially dangerous.

Ryanair’s chief executive, Michael O’Leary, has said the airline is now forced to divert almost one flight a day because of disruptive behavior, a level far above what carriers saw a decade ago. Harwood said public opinion appears to be shifting as well, pointing to YouGov research suggesting that almost half of Britons would support restrictions on early-morning airport drinking. He also cited Censuswide data showing that 65% of UK Millennials and 63% of Gen Z plan to reduce their alcohol consumption by 2026.

Still, Harwood argued that an outright ban would miss what makes the airport drink appealing in the first place. For many travelers, he said, it is less about alcohol than about marking the transition into vacation mode. Airports are places where routines break down and people move between work and leisure, he said, and the drink becomes part of that change.

He warned that banning pre-flight drinks altogether could punish most passengers for the actions of a small minority. The better answer, he suggested, may be to make alcohol-free beer, wine and cocktails more visible and more appealing in terminals and lounges.

That shift is already underway in parts of the travel industry. More bars and lounges are expanding their no-alcohol offerings as demand grows for moderation without social exclusion. Harwood said the quality of those drinks has improved sharply in recent years, making it easier for passengers to take part in the ritual without arriving at the

gate impaired or contributing to problems onboard.

He said alcohol should not disappear from airports entirely, since many travelers still see a drink before departure as part of the excitement of leaving. But if airlines want fewer incidents without making travel feel more restrictive, he said they may need to encourage alternatives that preserve the sense of occasion while reducing risk once passengers board.