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Diageo Launches 20% ABV Spirits for UK Drinkers Cutting Back

The move gives a mainstream boost to a little-known mid-strength category between full-proof liquor and alcohol-free options.

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Mid-strength alcoholic drinks are gaining attention in the UK as large producers move into a category that has so far been driven mainly by smaller brands and as more consumers say they want to cut back on alcohol without stopping altogether.

The shift has become more visible after Diageo launched new 20% ABV products under its Gordon’s, Smirnoff and Captain Morgan brands. The company said the move is aimed at giving consumers more options for different drinking occasions. Mark Sandys, Diageo’s chief product officer, said consumers want choice when they socialize and still expect familiar brands to deliver taste and quality even when alcohol content is lower.

The launch gives a mainstream push to a segment that has received far less attention than no- and low-alcohol drinks. Industry data cited by BeverageDaily suggests the market for moderate-strength products is being shaped by a broader pattern of alcohol moderation rather than a simple shift away from drinking.

Research from KAM points to room for growth. In a survey of 1,000 adults, 50% said they would rather have two mid-strength drinks than one full-strength option when choosing to have “just one” at the pub. Another 13% said they were “coasting” through an evening by alternating in mid-strength drinks to reduce total alcohol intake while keeping the same number of drinks.

That consumer behavior matters for drinks makers because it could change what people buy across beer, wine, cider and spirits rather than simply reduce total consumption. If the category expands, producers may need to adjust product ranges, pricing, pack sizes and marketing to cover more occasions between full-strength alcohol and alcohol-free alternatives.

Consumer awareness, however, remains limited. According to the KAM findings, fewer than half of consumers are familiar with mid-strength beer, and awareness is even lower for mid-strength wine, cider and spirits. That suggests the category may have demand potential, but it still faces a basic education problem at the shelf and in advertising.

Mintel data points to the same moderation trend on a wider scale. Martin Pasco, Mintel Food & Drink global associate principal, said 43% of UK adults have limited or reduced their alcohol consumption, including spirits, in the last 12 months, while another 19% do not drink alcohol. He also said half of UK drinkers ages 18 to 54 report “zebra striping,” or alternating between soft drinks and standard alcoholic drinks during the same occasion.

Pasco said that trend has almost certainly influenced Diageo’s decision to enter mid-strength spirits. In his view, the company is trying to cover more of the drinking occasion spectrum, from casual use to longer social occasions where consumers want to pace themselves. He said the strategy also fits with a wider fast-moving consumer goods approach in which companies create more pack sizes and product formats to capture different moments of consumption.

One argument in favor of mid-strength alcohol is that it may be easier for many consumers to understand than alcohol-free spirits. People trying to moderate often switch first to soft drinks because they are cheaper. Pasco said mid-strength spirits may offer a stronger proposition than no-alcohol spirits, which can be seen as expensive and may struggle to match the taste of standard spirits. He said products with alcohol levels reduced by roughly 25%-50% from full-proof spirits can still deliver some of the flavor consumers expect while helping them feel they are drinking less.

That could make the segment especially important for major spirits groups, which have been looking for ways to keep consumers in the category even as moderation becomes more common. For brewers, wineries and spirits companies, the rise of mid-strength products could reshape category mix and open a path to incremental sales if consumers use them to extend an evening rather than skip alcohol altogether. At the same time, the shift could force brand owners to be clearer about product positioning, because consumers may not automatically understand where mid-strength fits between full-strength and no-alcohol options.

Pasco said producers will have to support the segment with clearer messaging, stronger shelf presence and more education about when and how the products are meant to be used, within legal advertising limits. Without that, he said, the category may struggle to turn consumer interest into repeat purchasing.

Smaller brands in the space say the arrival of a large company could help solve that awareness problem. Gabriella Lamb, co-founder of 6Percent Wine, said Diageo’s launch is a positive development for independent producers because it introduces the term “mid-strength” to more shoppers. She said wider recognition could make consumers more likely to seek out the category across multiple beverage segments, not just the

products launched by one company.

Lamb said the broader social pattern supports the category’s prospects. In her view, people still want to go out and socialize, but many are doing so less often and are placing more value on the experience when they do. That makes products with lower alcohol content but recognizable flavor and brand cues more relevant to current habits.

The result is a market that sits between two established poles: traditional full-strength alcohol and the fast-growing no- and low-alcohol segment. Mid-strength products are not yet widely understood, but current data suggests they are gaining relevance as UK consumers look for more flexible ways to drink. For producers across spirits, wine, beer and cider, that opens a potential growth area, but one that will depend on whether companies can explain the category clearly enough for consumers to know what they are buying and why it fits their occasion.