

TRENDS

The age of zero

Sober spirits are the in thing

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Look at the push messages from food and beverage brands today — many of them revolve around 'zero'. Be it zero trans fat, zero sugar, zero preservatives, they ram in the absence factor. And the "zero" category is really expanding.

At the height of the pandemic last year, sitting out of Germany, in a place near Munich, Aman Gupta, former hotelier and founder of VEEN Waters, an expensive mineral water sourced from unpolluted parts of the earth, launched a company called Zero Percent. He says his own journey into wellbeing and mindfulness made him launch products in categories like zero alcohol, zero sugar, zero dairy and zero meat.

But the company is foraying into India first with its zero alcohol products — some of which it makes, others it sources.

One can understand the growing adoption of zero sugar, zero dairy and even zero meat, but why would anyone really want to consume a zero-alcohol product? Can't they just abstain or have juice?

There are all sorts of reasons, argues Gupta. The non-alcohol products mimic the taste and flavour of traditional spirits, allowing those who are on a detox, or driver duty during social occasions to still enjoy a tippie.

"Our goal is that within the next three years, every restaurant and bar will have an alcohol menu, soft drinks menu and a zero per cent menu," says Gupta.

In the alcohol category, the company has already got the entire portfolio of spirits, wine, beer, cider, and so on. But it is starting in India with zero-alcohol beer, non-alcoholic gin-and-tonic in a can, and wine in a can.

"Eventually we will get in all categories," says Gupta

Wouldn't zero meat have found easier acceptance in the Indian market, given its tradition of fasts, and so on? "Meat would

Aman Gupta,
Founder-
Managing
Director, Zero
Percent and
VEEN Waters



High road Non-alcoholic gin-and-tonic

be an interesting market but it requires different logistics — cold chain, etc. Since spirits don't require refrigeration and can move in ambient temperature, it's comparatively easier," says Gupta.

He says VEEN is already available across the country and the non-alcohol portfolio will piggyback on that distribution.

According to Naresh Gupta, COO of Gurugram-based independent agency Bang in the Middle, which did some work for VEEN a few years ago and knows the ethos of the company, the zero-alcohol segment is a very small, occasion-driven market. He feels the early adopters will be those wanting to make a statement on how conscious they are.

Globally, consumers really took to sipping non-alcohol products during the pandemic. Remember how fermented tea kombucha became such a fad.

Large spirits majors are sobering to the truth that the 'smart drinking

goals' trend is here to stay. And it's not restricted to the West but also percolated to India. From Ab InBev (which markets Budweiser and Hoegaarden) to Diageo to United Breweries, everyone is keeping bottles of zero-alcohol variants ready to pour.

Ramesh Viswanathan, Chief New Business Officer, United Breweries Limited, says they have three products — Kingfisher Radler, Heineken 0.0 and Kingfisher Ultra. "The products are targeted at 18-35, both male and female, higher socioeconomic audience living in five-plus lakh population towns. The category being nascent, we feel the early adopters will be from this demographic," he says. The category is growing at 50-plus per cent, despite the negative impact of Covid-19 on overall soft drink sales, he adds.

He points out that non-alcoholic beverages are a new-age, natural, lower calorie alternative to high-sugar carbonated soft drinks for young adults.