

“Go on, just have one...”

Giving up alcohol – and not just for one month – is a challenge for anyone, but imagine when your entire career involves drinking. Zeren Wilson shares his abstinence experience

Four months is a long time to keep battling that ‘just one’ suggestion away during anyone’s week. Sling in a role in the wine trade and you’ve got a combustible recipe for daily torment, a tugging and pulling that knows no end.

It feels like I’ve achieved a feat of Herculean proportions: 122 days of a total self-imposed booze ban, nothing, nada, zilch, not a sip – even negotiated a few tastings with genuine, never-before-seen 100 per cent spitting (even the good stuff, even the expensive kit), out it goes, sluicing into the spittoon. This was new territory, this was some serious strength of will, this was frightening.

It’s not just the role within the drinks industry that made this seem

at Zucca on Bermondsey Street, seeing their eyes light up and accept, pouring a glass of fizzing golden nectar into their glass, and watching as they took that first glorious sip of the evening – knowing how that feels was all part of the pleasure. Delayed gratification would come at the end of the shift, a teeth janglingly cold bottle of Peroni, despatched swiftly – the best beer is always ‘after service’ beer. Nothing like it on the planet.

We all know the mantra of ‘moderation’ in all things, the hoariest of clichés which we know makes sense, yet working in an industry where the whole experience is so tightly bound up with jollity and the potential for excess, means that it can become an

tougher if you’re not feeling too chipper yourself, for whatever reason. I was recently introduced to Healthy Hospo by wine maven Charlotte Wilde – soon to open Darling wine bar – a not-for-profit community interest company with the dream of building a healthier, happier and more sustainable hospitality industry. It’s a laudable venture which ‘strives to provide information, advice, and support on mental and physical health, wellness and living a happier life for all hospitality professionals’, via seminars and workshops, partnering with experts in the fields of health, nutrition and exercise. Whereas this kind of ‘wellness’ schtick may have got short shrift from me in the past, I can now

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like a tough ask. It’s the pints in between, it’s the ‘one for the roads’, it’s the catalogue of G&Ts and Negronis that tot up each night. Realising that not many days (if any) during the week are without a glass of something, and knowing that I need to shift some weight – a fair whack of timber needing to be shipped – the diary shows me that exactly four months from today will be Christmas Eve, and the decision is made: let’s buckle up for the ride, let’s do this.

Anyone working in hospitality will understand the lures and pitfalls that are bound up with the role, with alcohol such an important – and wonderful, exciting, compelling – part of the job, that’s it’s difficult to imagine the best moments without it. I got a vicarious kick from offering a glass of Franciacorta to guests during my time

issue for some people. It’s easy to be sucked into a whiplash cycle of work, pub, drinks at home, work up a hunger with a ‘sharpener’, ooh really fancy a takeaway, more drinks, bed, hungover breakfast, swift livener at 12pm to ‘take the edge off’, repeat. Chef Tom Kerridge’s well publicised 12-stone weight loss was helped, in no small part, by cutting out alcohol completely – for him, and for many others, it’s a point of no return, tapping out forever. During my stint, this four months of zero% ABV did most of the work in shifting those kilos – it was worth the aggressive drink shut-down. Job done.

There’s no doubt that the world of hospitality has its own very particular stresses and temptations, amplified by the fact that the whole shindig is about making other people happy: it’s a bloody hard job, made exponentially

appreciate it’s great to see this kind of support available, for a breathless industry that often doesn’t have time to slow down and take stock of things, least of all wellbeing.

During those four months I became mesmerised by the figures: 97 kg down to 96.2 kg today; 256 kcals in that pint; 10.1 units in that bottle; 78kcals in that egg; 13.5% ABV of 750ml = 567 kcals; 86.2 kg today; 750kcals eaten today; 24 days no booze; 68 days; 97 days; 7kcals per gram of alcohol, 9kcals per gram in fat. So it kicks on, swirling around amongst numbers, hammering black tea, micro-dosing with apple cider vinegar...oh and swimming, there’s regular morning swims too, but it’s this self-denial of wine/gin/beer that’s doing the donkey work, no doubt, and I’m fist-bumping myself each morning



"No thanks"

as the weight continues to shift, dropping off, 2kg, 5kg, there it goes, bye bye.

I fall into a wormhole of YouTube videos, one of them describing beer as essentially drinking 'liquid bread', the emptiest of calories, loaded with the kind of carbohydrates to decimate any potential weight loss. The phrase haunts me. The recommended weekly 14 units now seem hilariously low (6 pints!), with a standard Saturday at the football seeing many of us blasting through that in a day with ease. Then those figures again: 6 x 256kcal = 1536 kcal. Bang goes most of the day's recommended calories right there. Can I ever look at a pint the same way again? Do I have a problem? Do many of us have a problem without realising it? Maybe I should just kick the whole thing in to touch, forever? I'm enjoying the mental battle each day, a test of strength. Use the force, Luke...

I begin to annoy some mates. I can hear myself sounding preachy. The diary begins to look like a minefield: wine tasting; restaurant launch party; wine tasting; lunch booked; dinner booked; lunch and dinner booked. I agonise over which I can cancel. Maybe I just won't turn up to that one; and that one; yep, that one too: better, safer, clear. Out damn spot. It gets easier though, this novelty of lunch and dinner without the white heat of alcohol flushing the cheeks...a limitless

supply of filtered sparkling, that'll do. Keep 'em coming, please.

The alternatives? I've always been slightly sneery towards the growing alcohol-free options, gnashing teeth at the savage price of Seedlip's 'distilled non-alcoholic spirits'. £28 a bottle can do one. Still, genius business idea, ahead of the curve, and blowing wide open a category that is booming. Stryk is one I've recently tasted at Caravan restaurants, with its tagline 'all the spirit, none of the alcohol, and note that it's almost half the price of its trailblazing predecessor. I'm also passed a sample of Lucky Saint lager, and dammit, it tastes more than OK, brewed in Germany in a Pilsner style, and ooh look it's 0.5%, and only 53kcal. Maybe I can look beer in the face again. I begin to think maybe it's the motion of drinking which is a huge part of social drinking, the action, the up down, the glass to the lips. A pint of soda water (x6) in a pub while watching football helped. A lot.

122 days later – but hey, who's counting? – and the fitting drop on 24 December, Pol Roger 'Pure' Champagne with my oldest friend Adam and his family. It's supreme, zero-dosage (no added sugar at bottling), 55kcal (oh virtuous joy) per glass. That was that. It felt a bit anticlimactic, there was no round of applause, no angelic choirs. Whatever happened over that period worked, 26kg (almost four stone) of timber

shifted...cheerio. The comments that came as I met friends who hadn't seen me for a few months ranged from 'mate, you look amazing' to 'f**k, where's the rest of you?', motivating encouragement to make me want to maintain whatever results have been achieved. Am back in First Team action again, just a bit warier, a bit more cautious and slinging in many more days saying 'no thanks' and 'can I have soda water please?'

I viewed 'Dry January' through a different lens this year, the thought of a token month of abstinence looking a bit juvenile and, ultimately, futile, however well-meaning the sentiment and intention – it's a lifestyle shift that is more likely to bring the big rewards, the biggest benefits, and reclaiming some balance in a hectic work/life schedule will be the ongoing challenge for many of us. Get me, Mr Preachy. Right, where's that Franciacorta?

"Ok, I'll have just the one. Pint of soda water, please."

