

Low-No Alcoholic Wines as a Growing Product Category? Examining the Sober-Curious Movement in America

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1. INTRODUCTION

Low and reduced-alcohol beverages, such as reduced-alcohol wine, are becoming increasingly popular in many countries, with different factors driving a change in the beverage market. One of these trends is the “Sober-Curious” movement in the US, as well as other health-motivated or drinking moderation movement in parts of Europe and Australia. Does this new trend indicate potential growth in the low-no alcoholic wine category, and can the industry find a way to produce these types of wines so they actually taste good and are desired by consumers?

2. PRELIMINARY LITERATURE REVIEW

Wine Intelligence Report (2016) suggests increasing consumer demand for low-alcohol wine, with high acceptance in Germany and significant growth potentials in the U.S. and Canada. In Australia, research on consumer demand for low-alcohol wine (Saliba et al., 2013) shows a 16% acceptance of higher consumer interest in low alcohol wine, rising to 40% if the taste were the same as for standard wine products. In France, the government has suggested making January a month to abstain from alcohol for health reasons (Tidley, 2019).

In the US, the “sober-curious” movement is encouraging an alcohol-free lifestyle, or drinking less in general, as a pathway to a healthier existence (Gibson, 2019). It was apparently started by Millennials as a generational trend when they witnessed family members suffering from addiction (Groth, 2019). This, coupled with their focus on healthy food and living, helped propel the movement into the limelight. People became curious about how they would feel sober in the morning, instead of waking up with a hangover. This concept was picked up by the media, with the growth of addiction-based reality TV shows and the rise of social media platforms that stressed the positive impact of being sober, such as #soberissexy on Instagram with more than a half a million posts.

There are several outcomes of the sober-curious, including a rise in the number of Americans requesting low and no alcohol wines while shopping in major supermarkets (P. Markert, personal communication, July 2019). The growth of “mocktails” is also increasing (Ramirez, 2019). A positive outcome (Groth, 2019) is that people who have been hiding alcohol addiction from others, now have public support as they embrace “sober hip.”

3. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- 1) What are the characteristics of US consumers who are drinking less wine?
- 2) Why are they drinking less wine?
- 3) Do demographics or lifestyle have an impact on consumers who are drinking less wine?

4. METHODOLOGY

An online survey instrument was developed to collect information regarding American wine consumer behaviors and demographics. The survey company, Dynata, was hired to gather a quota sample of American wine drinkers from all 50 states, aged 21 or older. The survey was pilot tested and minor revisions were made based on the feedback. It was launched on a Survey Monkey platform in the Fall of 2019 over a two-week period. In the end, a total of 1221 useable responses were received regarding the independent variable of drinking more, less or the same about of wine. Preliminary data were analyzed using the statistical function in Survey Monkey.

5. PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

For the final sample of 1221 US consumers, when asked the questions: “In general, are you drinking the same, more, or less wine, beer, spirits?” the results show that 57% are drinking the same amount of wine, 10% are drinking more wine, and 33% are drinking less. The percentages for beer and spirits were similar, but a higher percentage of wine drinkers were drinking the same about of wine compared to beer and spirits. See Table 1 below:

Table 1: In general, are you drinking the same, more, or less of the following?

	Drinking Same	Drinking More	Drinking Less	Total Sample
Wine	57%	10%	33%	1221
Beer	53%	9%	38%	1219
Spirits	53%	8%	40%	1219

Interestingly, there was no significant difference in terms of gender. The sample included 52% women and 48% men, which is slightly higher than the US wine consumer average of 56% women to 44% men (WMC, 2018).

5.1 Characteristics of US Wine Consumers Now Drinking Less Wine

In terms of characteristics of the sample, significant differences were found on several motivational and lifestyle measures between US wine consumers who reported drinking less now compared to those who continue to drink the same or more wine. These include:

- **Wine Knowledge:** Consumers who are now drinking less wine are much more likely to label themselves as Novices that know very little about wine, compared to those consumers who continue to drink the same or more wine.
- **Wine Satisfaction:** Consumers drinking less are much more likely to disagree or strongly disagree with the statements that wine brings delight to their lives and that being a wine lover bring satisfaction, compared to other consumers.
- **Exercise Lifestyle:** Perhaps surprisingly, consumers drinking less are less likely to work out at a gym or engage in nature activities such as hiking, compared to other consumers.
- **Socialize Lifestyle:** Consumers drinking less wine are much less likely to socialize with friends and family compared to other consumers.

6. CONCLUSIONS/NEXT STEPS

Preliminary results suggest that some American wine consumers are drinking less wine, and it appears that the majority are not as involved in wine or as knowledgeable about wine as those who continue to drink the same amount or more. This suggests that less-involved and motivated wine consumers are more likely to decrease their wine consumption over time.

It is not clear as to the reasons why they are now electing to drink less wine, but it could be due to the popular sober-curious trend that is sweeping the US economy, and has also been witnessed in parts of Europe and Australia. Additional research needs to be conducted in order to understand why consumers are electing to drink less wine.

More importantly, the wine industry needs to investigate whether or not providing low and/or no alcoholic wine as a growing product category would be attractive to consumers. Preliminary evidence of higher sales rates of non-alcoholic wine in US grocery stores, as well as other parts of the world, indicate that this could be a promising new product category for the global wine industry to consider – especially since wine grapes would still be used to produce the wine, thus providing economic sustainability to thousands of small wineries and vineyards around the world, and perhaps increasing the health of consumers.

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