

OP-ED

## Zero Percent: A Search for the Perfect Non-Alcoholic Summer Beer

August 30, 2019

One of the most difficult parts of my early sobriety was getting the word out. I was worried about how the news would affect the way my friends saw me (a worry that apparently did not plague me when I would regularly drink 12 PBRs in front of them) so I was somewhat surprised when one of the first friends I told responded with an easygoing, “Oh, fun, everyone is sober right now!” as though I’d just announced that I was considering a bold new hairstyle. It felt odd to me that something that carried the unspoken conversational weight that sobriety tends to carry could be trending, but she was right. The world of sobriety has become almost unrecognizable over the last few years. Maybe it’s the hellish news cycle or maybe we’re all just reaching the end of our twenties, but it feels like more and more people are examining their relationship with alcohol and making a conscious choice to opt out.

I first decided to try out non-alcoholic beer about a month ago. I was getting ready for a yearly lake trip I take with a handful of childhood friends who’ve managed to stay in close contact over the course of nearly two decades, an event we lovingly call Lakesgiving. (It’s like the Adam Sandler movie *Grown Ups 2* but real and not critically reviled.) This was going to be my first one sober and I was feeling a little down about missing out on one of the best experiences the Midwest offers: drinking a bunch of cheap beers by a lake. I wasn’t ignorant of that fact that in sobriety you lose a lot of experiences. The first drag of a drunk cigarette, shamelessly making out with a near-stranger at a bar, the moment your friends decide to have one more drink and watch the sunrise—these are all things that I am much healthier for cutting out of my life, but I occasionally miss them all the same. So I went in search of a substitute for an experience I wasn’t ready to lose yet.

**“Do it,’ I thought. ‘I fucking dare you, dude.’ Weizen-Radler had made me more powerful than the law.”**



Before I went to the liquor store, I’d only heard of one non-alcoholic beer: O’Douls. I assumed there would be a few other knock-offs that I could try, but was shocked to find that the selection was massive. In an attempt to avoid being paralyzed by my options, I grabbed the first four beers that stuck out: The Paulaner Weizen-Radler, WellBeing Brewing’s Hellraiser Dark Amber, [Lagunitas’ Hoppy Refresher](#), and of course, O’Douls. When I checked out alone with four different six packs, the cashier first looked at me like I had a problem, then looked at me with confusion, then once again looked at me like I had a problem. But hey, *had*. Past tense.

Thursday night, my friends and I all arrived at the house we’d rented for the weekend and got settled. Like most groups of old friends, we quickly snapped back into the dynamic we’d known for years. There’s great comfort in being around friends who knew you during your adolescence and because of that, I’ve never needed to worry much about my sobriety around them. These people knew me when I refused to wash my hair and wore Punisher T-shirts to parties. If they got through that, they’re in it for the long haul.

Like the rest of America, my friends were having a White Claw Summer. I have nothing but respect for the marketing team at White Claw—they’ve done remarkable work—but I had my White Claw summer in 2018. I learned that deceptively boozy drink’s secrets and if their experience is anything like mine was, a lot of White Claw Summers are going to turn into Sober Falls. I decided to crack open my White Claw equivalent. Lagunitas’ Hoppy Refresher isn’t even billed as a beer—it’s technically a “hop-inspired beverage.” I take a



By Dan Sheehan

sip and my first thought is that "Hoppy Refresher" is a perfect name for this drink. It definitely doesn't taste like beer, but it's still satisfying! I was always fairly ambivalent toward IPAs (though Lagunitas' IPA was among my favorites) but I can imagine that a now-sober IPA fan would welcome an allusion to that classic taste. It was a perfect, if insubstantial, opening drink for the weekend, and at zero carbs and calories, there's really no downside.

The next day we hit the beach early and I packed a few Weizen-Radlers. Radlers are essentially just a hybrid of beer and fruity soda, and without the alcoholic element, the fruity soda was really given a chance to shine. The Weizen-Radler has a strong citrus flavor with just a hint of beer-y goodness in the background. It feels like a lemonade that's been haunted by the ghost of a wheat beer and I loved every minute of it. For some it might be a little too sweet, but people who dislike sweet things are known for routinely denying themselves joy and are not to be trusted. I doubly enjoyed it because the beach didn't allow alcohol so I was the only one who didn't have to sneak sips of his drink like some sort of high schooler. I got a double take from some sort of beach cop and made direct eye contact. *Do it, I thought. I fucking dare you, dude.* Weizen-Radler had made me more powerful than the law.

## "It tastes like college. It tastes like a cheap beer you drink while everyone is yelling at you. But everything has its place and Sober Flip Cup is the game O'Doul's was born to play."



That night our designated Friend Who Can Cook Good threw a bunch of mackerel on the grill and I grabbed myself a Hellraiser Dark Amber. My first swig caught me by surprise, but not because of any lack of quality. The Hellraiser tastes the most like its alcoholic counterpart of any beer on this list and I found it briefly unsettling. With the Hoppy Refresher being more beer-adjacent and the Weizen-Radler being so fruit-forward, I hadn't been prepared for the Hellraiser's honest-to-god amber flavor. For those new to sobriety, it might be a bit jarring in that regard. But if that's not a concern, Hellraiser is a delight. It's smooth with a full flavor. The label design is great, too. It's the sort of non-alcoholic beer I wish I could get at events where I don't feel like explaining my sobriety to strangers.

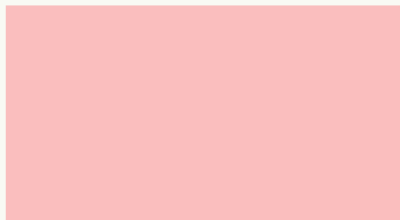
By the end of the weekend I'd polished off a good chunk of my supply but I hadn't found a place for O'Douls. I almost felt bad. O'Douls has been a staple of the non-alcoholic beer world but it's also been the butt of jokes about their historically unsatisfying nature. I wasn't sure where it would fit in among all these fresh-faced new additions to the non-alcoholic canon until one of my friends insisted that the entire group play Flip Cup. (For the unfamiliar: Flip Cup is a drinking game you can play if you want to throw up while also letting your friends down.) As we set up the game, I opened up an O'Douls. It tastes like college. It tastes like a cheap beer you drink while everyone is yelling at you. But everything has its place and Sober Flip Cup is the game O'Douls was born to play.

Later that night we all sat on the porch with no one as drunk as they thought they'd be. We joked about how we could tell we were all getting older by how much less beer gets consumed on these trips each successive year. One of my friends asked me if I remembered the trip where I offered to make mojitos for everyone but botched them so badly that no one wanted them, which led me to drink most of them myself and black out. I laugh and remind him that while I literally cannot remember that evening, I'll never forget the hangover that followed it. I take a lingering look at my half-full O'Douls and take a swig. I'm not sure if it tastes good, but I know it's making my night better. If a good beer can accomplish anything, it's that.

*Illustration by Adam Waito.*

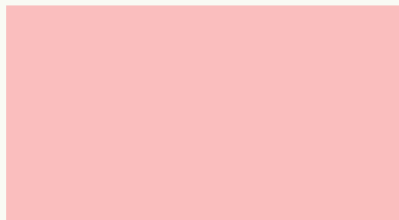
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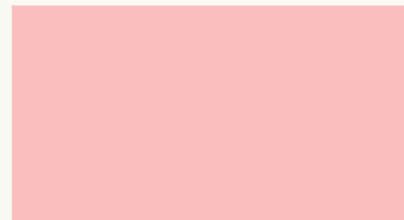
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