The empty glass

scritto da Fabio Piccoli | 20 Febbraio 2026



Dry January is no longer just a month of abstinence, it has become a lens through which to observe a deeper cultural shift. Functional social beverages are emerging not as mere substitutes for alcohol, but as a new attempt to redefine sociality itself. A trend that raises more questions than it answers about our relationship with pleasure, rituals, and control.

Among the most interesting, and at the same time most complex, contributions dedicated today to the theme of alternatives to alcoholic beverages, the article "*Dry January insights: What beverage makers can learn from a month without alcohol*", published by FoodBev Media and written by Evan Quinn, undoubtedly deserves attention.

It is a dense and articulate text, which uses the Dry January phenomenon not so much as a simple exercise in abstinence, but

as a tool for observing a deeper shift in social behaviours and consumption patterns. At the centre of the analysis emerges a concept that is still elusive, not entirely defined, but already laden with expectations: that of the so-called functional social beverages.

And it is precisely here that the article, perhaps deliberately, leaves more questions open than answers. What are these beverages, really? Do they already exist as a recognisable category, or are we still in a phase where the idea precedes the product? The impression is that we are faced not so much with a consolidated reality, but with an attempt to interpret, and in part to guide, new approaches to sociality through consumption.

What does emerge clearly, however, is the underlying principle: drinking no longer as a gesture in itself, but as an experience to be adapted to increasingly specific relational contexts. **Beverages conceived not only for "being together," but for how to be together.** And so, almost without noticing, we begin to imagine scenarios that, until a few years ago, would have seemed caricatural: one drink for lunch with a colleague, another for an informal meeting that nonetheless remains professional, yet another for a romantic date in its early stages, when everything is fragile and still taking shape.

On reflection, the analysis holds up perfectly. We live immersed in a historical phase in which everything is continuously questioned, redefined, reformulated. Nothing truly surprises us anymore, not even the idea that beverage consumption might fragment into a myriad of codified micro-occasions. For centuries we imagined that wine, obviously in relation to the quantities consumed, could represent the beverage capable of accompanying, naturally, a plurality of social moments. **Today we must perhaps acknowledge that this centrality can no longer be taken for granted.**

In this sense, one passage in the article is particularly interesting, as it seems to indirectly address the concerns that have long accompanied the world of non-alcoholic wines. When alcohol is removed from these moments, Quinn observes, the void can become apparent. Many of the earliest non-alcoholic or functional beverages focused almost exclusively on replication: imitating the taste, aroma, or appearance of beer, wine, or spirits. A technically remarkable exercise in many cases, but one which, according to the data cited, did not guarantee lasting consumer engagement over time.

The point is crucial. Because it suggests that the limitation lies not so much in the organoleptic quality of non-alcoholic alternatives, but in the very idea of substitution. Trying to "do as before, but without alcohol" risks preserving the ritual only in appearance, while emptying it of its symbolic and relational function. Hence, perhaps, the ambition to move beyond the concept of replication – imagining beverages that do not compete directly with wine on its own terms, but instead attempt to redefine the meaning of the social experience that accompanies them.

And yet, an underlying feeling is difficult to ignore. Rather than a society simply "in transition," what we seem to be facing is a disoriented society, experimenting with new solutions without yet having fully identified the problem to be solved. **The questioning of everything – food, drinks, rituals, relationships – is undoubtedly the symptom of a profound unease, of an authentic need to rethink models that no longer work.** But that does not mean every proposed answer is automatically the right one.

The idea that the future might be populated by non-alcoholic beverages enriched with adaptogens, nootropics, and botanicals capable of modulating mood, concentration, or relaxation is both fascinating and unsettling. One instinctively hopes it remains, at least in part, an almost science-fiction projection. A bit like when, as children, we were told that

one day we would no longer eat meat or cheese, but would nourish ourselves with mysterious “pills” like astronauts.

Perhaps the real crux is not whether these beverages will succeed or not, but what they tell us about ourselves. **About our relationship with pleasure, with sociality, with the increasingly marked need to control, optimise, and functionalise even that which, by definition, should remain spontaneous.** In this sense, more than a new product category, functional social beverages seem to be the mirror of a cultural transformation that is still entirely to be understood.

Key points

1. **Dry January has evolved into a broader cultural observation tool**, beyond simple alcohol abstinence.
2. **Functional social beverages aim to redefine social experiences**, not merely replicate alcoholic drinks.
3. **Simple alcohol-free imitation of wine or beer has failed to sustain long-term consumer engagement**.
4. **Wine’s historical centrality as a universal social drink** is increasingly being questioned and challenged.
5. **These new drinks reflect a society driven by the need to optimise and control** even spontaneous moments.