

# THE TIMES

## THE SUNDAY TIMES

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## Will Self on drinking after alcoholism

**After years of research, the writer believes that he has finally found a grown-up soft drink** Will Self

I think it ill behoves recovering alcoholics — among whose number I include myself — to complain about the mores of the great drinking majority. After all, we've had our fill, and we'd be well advised to shut up and take our sparkling mineral water like the good men and women we'd like to become.

But then ... there's the use of that verb — drinking — to indicate alcohol drinking without any modifier being required; it's tough living in a society where the very act of imbibing is synonymous with intoxication, and all the harder because the available alternative drinks aren't so much soft as sugary gloop suitable only for inducing fits in preteens (or mixing with teens' and kidults' vodka).

Besides, not everyone who doesn't drink alcohol is a recovering alcoholic; even if you're fed up to the back teeth with uptight 12-step types, spare a thought for those with physical illnesses (or medications) that keep them off the grog, or whose religious beliefs enjoy abstinence. True, the boozy consensus has changed in the past 20 years or so: I had a spell on the wagon in the late 1980s, and in those days simply asking for a non-alcoholic drink sent shock waves through any social gathering. "What!" Your host would bellow. "Don't you drink?" To which the only possible rejoinder was: "Of course I drink, I'm not a robot."

Nowadays, so long as you don't make a fuss, you will at least be tolerated, if not exactly pampered. Your host will gesture to the cans of Coke and 7UP, or possibly a few cartons of cranberry juice; they may be super-hip — in their eyes — and have gone to the huge trouble of laying in a bottle of Rock's concentrated ginger or elderflower gloop, under the erroneous impression that it's terribly sophisticated.

- Will Self's taste test on non-alcoholic drinks

But if all that's on offer is sparkling water, your host will even look a little mortified for a moment . . . before hustling off to top up someone else's champagne flute.

The key thing is not to make any special claims on the drinkers — who are notoriously volatile people; be like the good vegetarian who just loves a dinner consisting entirely of lettuce while all about him are wallowing in steak tartare.

I gave up searching for the holy grail of a proper non-alcoholic drink for grown-ups years ago. True, at a bar or restaurant I can order a tonic water with a dash of Angostura Bitters, or a virgin mary, but that's just two strong flavours for a lifetime's tasting and, besides, no one ever has the makings in his or her home. Then it transpired that someone had secretly been working on just this desideratum right under my nose.

I've known Peter Spanton for a long time; back in the absinthe-tinted past he managed the Fridge nightclub in Brixton, South London, and after that he had a long spell running Spanton, a fairly notorious watering hole in Clerkenwell, Central London. Nowadays, Spanton — like me — is several years off the sauce, but unlike me he does something unequivocally worthwhile: teaching cookery to children with emotional and behavioural problems who have been excluded from schools.

He has also developed what is — I swear — the most interesting non-alcoholic drink that I've tasted.

Spanton is intent on launching a range of sophisticated soft drinks. Some will be tonic-style carbonated tipples, in flavours such as cardamom, mint and bitters, and lemongrass — he's working on these with an holistic nutrition expert. But more exciting, for me, is his acai range, of which Beverage No 7 is the first. Acai is, of course, the new Brazilian superberry. High in antioxidants, and notoriously difficult to process (the kernel has to be crushed), most acai-based drinks currently available have only 4 per cent ABV (acai-by-volume).

Spanton fell for the taste five years ago and it has taken him this long to find someone who can filter the berry to produce a 50 per cent ABV drink. I didn't know what to expect when I poured my first glass of No 7, but what struck me first was a rich, fruity — yet astringent — bouquet. You don't expect a soft drink to have a nose — and nor do you expect it to have as much body and depth of colour. But the real shock is the taste, which is just as complex as a vintage red wine, with notes of acidity, sweetness, fruit and tannin — moreover, it's a taste that has a long finish. Indeed, while not in any way being like wine, the wine-like characteristics of No 7 may be a little freaky for those who've just sworn off the sauce, but for those of us safely on the far shores of the Lethe, No 7 is a pure *donné*.

I spent a week trying this new soft drink with fish, with fowl, and even standing up and pretending to be at a cocktail party — it did the trick in all these contexts.

Spanton has a logo on the bottles of a nattily suited rabbit man wearing dark glasses, and the suggestion of David Lynchian weirdness and sophistication is an inspired bit of branding. It would ill behove me to insist that everyone put a case of Beverage No 7 in their cellar alongside their Ruinart, but if you'd like this bunny to come lolling over, it would certainly help.

*Sample bottles of Beverage No 7 are now available via [peterspantonbeverages.com](http://peterspantonbeverages.com)*

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