

Soft drinks grow up

Looking for a tasty alternative to alcohol? Peter Spanton, former restaurateur (and alcoholic), may have the bottle for you. By [Gerard Gilbert](#)

Ten in the morning seems early to be imbibing in a bar just off unlovely Leicester Square in London's West End, but then the sophisticated tinctures I'm sampling don't contain a drop of the hard stuff. They are the creations of recovering alcoholic Peter Spanton, former owner of trendy drinking den Vic Naylor's in Clerkenwell, who has created an eponymous range of beverages to cater for all types of teetotaller.

"Just because I've stopped drinking doesn't mean I've lost all my taste or my desire for good things," he says. "So when people around me are drinking champagne or £80 bottles of wine, why am I sitting here with fizzy water or a kid's orange juice?" Pouring me a glass of Peter Spanton No 7, a ruby-red elixir that, in hue at least, could be mistaken for wine, he says: "It actually looks like a merlot in the glass. The thing I wanted was something you could sip and spend time with."

In his desire not to be left holding the kiddie-pops, Spanton seems to have stumbled on a growing trend. More and more people are cutting back or cutting out – and that's before you get to those who don't self-intoxicate for cultural, religious, pregnancy or health

reasons. Personally I haven't sunk alcohol during the week for two years now, an abstinence that began for financial reasons (the weekly wine bill was getting a tad excessive), but continued when I discovered the health benefits – better quality sleep being the most immediate. Peter Spanton No 7 is made up of 55 per cent acai berries from Brazil, valued for its antioxidant qualities, but if we'd met at this hour of the morning back in the 1990s, Spanton would have been pouring 55 per cent alcohol.

"I was a serious drinker," he recalls of his days running Vic Naylor's and living on a Thames-side houseboat in Chelsea. "I'd get up at about ten and I'd drink a bottle of wine. Then I would stop at a bar on the King's Road for an orange juice and vodka, and finally get to my restaurant at about midday and then I'd start drinking properly."

Vic Naylor's' clientele ranged from "the fringes of gangsterism" to YBAs such as the Chapman brothers, Tracey Emin and Sarah Lucas, who, until they were priced out to Hoxton, had galleries nearby. Sam Taylor-Wood worked as a barmaid. "She met Jay Jopling [the

art dealer and her former husband] there," says Spanton.

Lucky to emerge with his liver intact,

Spanton turned his back on the sauce in 1999, having met his current partner, Janet Street-Porter, who persuaded him ("kicking and screaming") to book into The Priory. "We never made a profit again because when I stopped drinking the party stopped," he says. "People wanted the madness, they wanted me to be the ringmaster."

Spanton soldiered on with Vic Naylor's for another five years. "People getting pissed around me was just boring, and ugly, and just hollow," he says, as we chink glasses and I get my first, slightly medicinal, taste of No 7. "Acai itself isn't particularly pleasant, it's got quite a metallic taste," he explains. "Most people use it for smoothies, adding raspberries to it. I used a particular musky grape as I wanted that sort of wine-ishness. Then I added spices and a bit of spring water and to be honest it's a bit of a Marmite thing – you either like it, or you can't stand it."

Among those who love it are Damon Albarn and Paul Simonon (the former Clash guitarist now part of Gorillaz),

who take it on tour. Another friend – and recovering alcoholic – Will Self, wrote in praise of No 7 last year before the drink was even launched."

The resident cookery writer of this newspaper, Mark Hix, stocks Span-



ton's drinks in his restaurants, as does "nose-to-tail" chef Fergus Henderson of St John's Restaurant – in fact we meet in the bar of Henderson's new hotel venture, the St John's Hotel, whose mini-bars include No 7. With friends like these, little wonder that Spanton doesn't pay to advertise.

The second sip of my No 7 and I'm struck how viscous it seems, almost like a glass of port. Although acai (pronounced ass-eye) is cherished for its supposed health-giving properties, this is not what he is promoting. "I don't put anything on the bottle that it's a health drink," he says. "But when I was doing tastings in Selfridges recently, people take acai supplements were really fascinated by this whole thing because acai is not an easy thing to drink."

In fact it took Spanton three years to filter the sludge-like crushed berries and turn them into the finished product. "This sells at £3.60 a bottle because

it's expensive to make," he says. "I drink it at room temperature, other people have it with ice... you can put a squeeze of lime in it which changes it completely, or a drop of Angostura in it. The Rochelle Canteen (in Shoreditch) make a big Sangria type thing out of it with fresh mint and cucumber sort of stuff."

And Spanton is quite happy for boozers to use his drinks as mixers or cocktail bases – especially his new range of quinine-based tonics – No 3 (cardamom), No 4 (mint & bitters – actually quite chocolate flavoured), No 5 (lemongrass). "You could imagine putting a vodka in it", he says of No 3, or "that would go great with Bacardi," he adds of No 4.

"More and more people don't want to

drink alcohol – and they don't want to drink alcohol in the day, that's for sure," says Anna Hansen, chef-patron of the Modern Pantry in Clerkenwell.

And what diners are really getting into, apparently, is tea. As recently as the 1960s, all but the smallest minority of us drank a cuppa with our meals. "Teas are becoming more like drinking wine, it's all about terroir and all the rest of it," says Hansen. "People are getting quite a foodie ethic about the variety of teas and the intricacies of them all."

She has also started pairing teas with specific dishes. "At the moment we've

got this green tea and calamansi lime with wasabi sashimi dish and I've just

matched that with a chilled elderflower, mint and Earl Grey tea."

Around the corner at Bistrot Bruno Loubet at the Zetter Hotel, Bruno Loubet also suggests teas. "At the moment I'm doing an infusion made of lemon peel, orange peel, star anise, rosemary, lavender, saffron... all the things from Provence basically."

Loubet suggests a DIY approach to wine alternatives – deconstructing your favourite grape variety and then attempting to replicate its flavours. "If you have water with a little bit of elderflower and lemon that would be to replace a white wine, for example, like a sauvignon," he says. "If someone really wants to really go for it, they could try the old-fashioned flavours in a shiraz. Boil a bit of water with a bay leaf... add a bit of cinnamon... some blackcurrant, one clove, half a bay-leaf... some blackberry..."

Or you could just crack open one of Peter Spanton's beverages, as I did the other night, accompanying a take-away fish and chips with a bottle of No 5. The lemongrass-ginger-quinine combo cut nicely through the fry-up. Spanton says it's equality he's after, not segregation.

"[Former drinkers] either become really pious or reactionary or reclusive," he says. "Janet drinks and... I like her when she's tiddly – she's funny. But what I don't like is this whole thing when people stop drinking is that they become awkward. If you're in a bar or restaurant or club, and you don't want to drink, you still want something entertaining in your glass. You still want to think you're being thought about."

HOLD THE WINE LIST: CHEFS' CONCOCTIONS

TOM KITCHIN: THE KITCHIN, EDINBURGH

"We have home-made lemonade and seasonal non-alcoholic cocktails – in the rhubarb season, for example, we make one from the cooking liquor of the rhubarb."

ANNA HANSEN: THE MODERN PANTRY, LONDON

"I often drink jasmine tea, or green tea, with my meals. It's so delicate and refreshing – it kind of goes with anything you're eating. We try to make our own cordials: elderflower fizz and quince cordials."

LAURIE GEAR OF THE ARTICHOKE IN AMERSHAM, BUCKS

"We have a juice menu, changing almost on a daily basis – something I learned from my time at Noma in Copenhagen. At the moment we've got a cucumber and borage, and a coconut water and pineapple."

BRUNO LOUBET: BISTROT BRUNO LOUBET, LONDON

"I like a bit of lemon in water – like a citron pressé. If you want something red, then grape juice is good, although you need to add something sour, like pomegranate juice."

