

The soft sell: Is Beverage No 7 a drink worth staying sober for?

Fed up with binge-drinking Britain and realising that he was sinking into alcoholism, Peter Spanton set about creating the sort of soft drink he craved. The result: a sophisticated potion he calls Beverage No 7

By Lena Corner

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One night in 2005, when the Christmas party season was in full swing, publican Peter Spanton looked out across his bar in the early hours and surveyed the scene. All around him was a heaving mass of drunk businessmen and women in various states of undress, scraping themselves up from the floor. Spanton stood and watched with a rising sense of distaste. "It was absolutely vile," he says. "Braying drunks and marauding women with mascara running down their faces. There and then I decided I couldn't do it any more."

Spanton, now 55, had been in the bar trade ever since his twenties when he started out making cocktails ("great big, seriously alcoholic, sickly creamy ones") at London's legendary Blitz nightclub – so it was a big decision to make. True to his word, not long into the New Year, he went into the bar, handed over the keys to his business partner and jacked it all in. "That was the moment," says Spanton, "that I began to reinvent myself."

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The bar in question was one Vic Naylor's on St John Street in London's Clerkenwell. It opened back in 1986 way before Fergus Henderson's St John had moved into the former smokehouse a few doors down, and way before Clerkenwell became stuffed full of loft

spaces for millionaires. "Back then," says Spanton, "the whole area was completely derelict. So we completely ignored all the licensing laws and just stayed open all night. We basically spent 15 years partying."

Spanton always made a point of refusing to advertise Vic Naylor's; he wanted to create something built entirely by word of mouth. Its bare brick walls and tatty 1960s pin-ups – a legacy from the venue's previous incarnation as a joinery – were testament to his laid-back ethos. It was a time when many of the YBAs were just out of college and Tracey Emin, Sarah Lucas and the Chapman brothers, who are all still friends to this day, would regularly prop up the bar. Sam Taylor-Wood, meanwhile, was one of the barmaids. On many nights after last orders, the entire contents of the Groucho Club would make a mass exodus east across London to carry on partying there. In the early days, at least, if you came across Vic Naylor's it felt a little bit as if you had stumbled across a private members' bar. One that you had access to simply by virtue of the fact that you had managed to find it.

But then, says Spanton, as the 1990s drew to a close, it stopped being fun. As Clerkenwell developed, the Vic's clientele changed. "It became about accountants and bankers and money. Pissed female lawyers were the worst. They would come in, get drunk, tell me the service was crap, say they were not going to pay their bill, then threaten to close me down. Absolutely disgusting." Spanton had also developed a problem with alcohol. In 1999, he checked himself into the Priory. "I was drinking too much, it just had to stop," he says. "It was the toughest thing I've ever done."

When he came out, he pretty much slipped back into his old life, but as time went by he started to become increasingly irked about the way, as a non-drinker, he was being 'treated: "I was part of a nuisance market that nobody bothered to cater for." When he went out, his options were either a "kiddie drink" such as Coke, water or, if he was at a wedding, "an elderflower fizz" if he was lucky, he says. With the zeal of the newly converted, Spanton decided to reinvent himself as the creator of a range of quality non-alcoholic drinks aimed at discerning adults such as himself.

"The thing about not drinking is that you're still the same person you were before," he says. "I still went out to clubs and bars, but there was nothing out there for me to drink. I thought it was rubbish. I was not being looked after. I was being treated like a second-class citizen."

At home in his kitchen, Spanton began playing around with ingredients. He started experimenting with the acai berry, a Brazilian superfood enormously high in antioxidants. But while being very good for you, the acai is also enormously difficult to work with and Spanton found himself trying to turn thick gloop into a fine sipping drink.

"My first instinct was to try to dilute it," he says, "but that didn't work because it was like trying to dilute mud." He wracked his brains, ruined a few pans, tried straining it in his coffee filter and asked various companies if they could separate it using centrifugal force. But nothing worked. Finally, he ended up dumping it all in a muslin bag and when he returned to it two days later, he discovered that the elusive elixir he was looking for had finally drained through. "That was a turning point," he says. "Finally I had the acai in a workable form."

Spanton set about working out what flavours to add and how to sweeten it. "Acai has a very strange and quite difficult flavour; slightly metallic with overtones of chocolate." He was determined that his drink should be created entirely from natural products and, after three

years slaving over reductions on a hot stove, finally hit upon a formula which used the aromatic Concord grape to sweeten it.

Understandably, Spanton is highly protective of his recipe, and the only other two ingredients he'll let on about are clove and star anise. He christened it Beverage Number 7. "I drove my friends and my other half mad getting them to taste my various concoctions," he says. "But, ultimately, I trusted my own tastebuds. With a project like this you've got to be a benign dictator and just go with it." The result he shows me proudly is a deep, deep red liquid, which contains 55 per cent pure acai and comes in a slightly retro glass bottle. The drink itself is very slightly viscous, like port, and is designed to be drunk, like red wine, at room temperature. It is a tippable to sit and nurse rather than gulp in a thirst-quenching bursts. "I wanted it to have the characteristics of a good wine," says Spanton. "Like Marmite, I think people will either love it or hate it. I actively hope children will dislike it."

I take a few bottles to the Three Kings pub on Clerkenwell Green just around the corner from where Vic Naylor's used to be (it has since been ripped out and turned into the high-end contemporary restaurant Eastside Inn). As Spanton predicted, opinions are mixed. One person says it reminds her of "Friar's Balsam, that old-fashioned cough tincture we were forced to have as children". Another says it is only palatable served chilled with soda water, while a third sips it slowly and carefully and declares it to be brilliant.

In some ways, it's a little like Spanton has been on *The Apprentice* for the past three years – sourcing producers, boutique bottlers and someone willing to turn a small vial of acai drink into a commercial enterprise. The design for the brand is retro yet modern at the same time and was created by one of his former drinking buddies, Ralph Robinson. "I came up with the concept and Ralph designed it," says Spanton. "I had an idea for the logo to be this bunny rabbit, a sort of enigmatic Twin Peaks/David Lynchian figure. It's not about the Playboy bunny, it's about backwards-speaking dwarfs." The whole enterprise cost around £4,000.

Spanton is now working on a second acai-berry flavour, called Number 9, this one with sour cherries. "It's proving to be a very interesting recipe," he says. "When you mix them with the acai they change each other entirely. Pure fruit-juice alchemy." He is also planning to bring out Number 13, a drink tailored for clubbers he is working on with DJ Tom Stephan, who works at dry nightclub Godspeed along with Boy George. And as well as this he has three tonic waters – lemongrass, cardamom and mint and angostura – due out in September, "I've been visiting 'flavour houses' to find the right essence to create them," he says. "It's very like making perfume."

For Spanton, the whole thing is about more than just getting a nice drink in a bar. He likens the plight of the non-drinker to the way vegetarians were treated 20 years ago and sees his drinks as representative of a wider philosophy of inclusiveness – looking after people who choose to be different. "I have no competitors," he declares, "because no one has done anything like this before." Spanton's anger at the industry is palpable. "I think young people are being manipulated by the booze trade into become heavy drinkers," he says. "Alcopops, for example, are the most cynical thing I have ever seen. You can date the advent of binge-drinking to their invention. They have entirely missed the opportunity to address grown-ups who don't want to drink. After my drinks come out, I guarantee there will be a raft of copycats."

I ask him how he plans to market his drinks and, just as with Vic Naylor's, Spanton says he is going to make a point of not advertising them. "People like to discover things for themselves," he says. "Those people who mercilessly promote what they do are not respecting our intelligence." Instead, he plans to just "put it out there" – but the drinks market is notoriously difficult to crack and whether Spanton's drinks capture the imagination or just fizzle out remains to be seen. The early signs are encouraging – Selfridges and Mark Hix snapped it up immediately.

Alongside inventing his drinks, Spanton has also spent the past four years training to be a counsellor for addicts and alcoholics and has started teaching cookery to children with emotional and behavioural difficulties at Aylands School in Enfield. "I teach these rufy-tuftu boys how to cook. It's been an amazing experience. They just love it; they're all now doing gorgeous pastries and making bread."

Thus, it seems, Spanton's reinvention is complete. "I think all the things I'm doing kind of head in the same sort of direction," he concludes. "The bar trade was a fantastic trade to pick up people skills. But I've moved on from that now. This drink kind of sums it up. It's a drink which says that even though I don't drink any more I'm still a rock'n'roller. It's for people who have been there, done it and managed to come through the other side." And with that he heads off with a box of drinks under his arm, ready to spread the word to the next person he can.

Beverage Number 7 Acai Blend will be available from next month at peterspantonbeverages.com