

SoBER, So GOOD

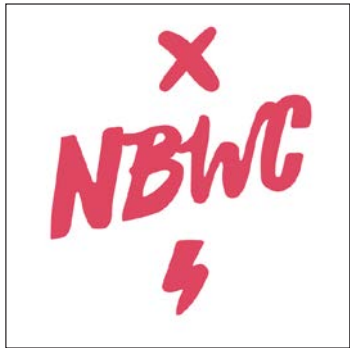
*Feel like you'd like to ditch drinking?
New Zealand's fastest-growing conscious
community reckons you're in good company.
Philippa Prentice meets its founder.*

I stopped drinking on the regular in my early twenties. Alcohol wasn't a problem for me, but I was no stranger to downing too much or drinking just to fit in. So one day, sick of making a fool of myself, and the epic hangovers that resulted from as little as one glass, I decided: no more.

Alcohol just isn't my jam, so giving it the flick was a pleasure, not a process. Nevertheless, being teetotal hasn't been easy. In the decades since, I've sometimes still found myself with a drink in hand, the desire not to have to explain myself or be pressured, judged, insulting or 'boring' trumping my preference to honour my health. I've often felt like not drinking's just not the done thing.

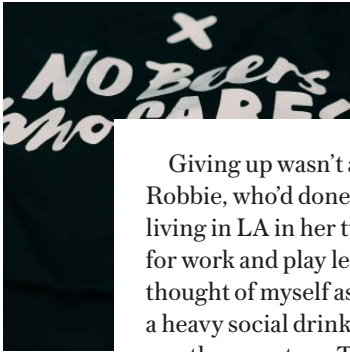
Good news, then, that times are a-changin'. With movements around the globe beginning to shift attitudes – such as LA's Hip Sobriety; The Shine's mindful-socialising events, held from New York to London; Hello Sunday Morning, the world's largest online movement towards a better drinking culture, founded in Australia; and Wellington-based online recovery community Living Sober, which recently added its 5000th member – going alcohol-free is becoming kinda cool. Legions are beginning to wonder: do I need alcohol to have a good time? And what's my idea of a good time anyway?

These were some of the questions TV journalist turned yoga and meditation instructor/entrepreneur Claire Robbie was keen to explore. And so she created No Beers? Who Cares! (NBWC), a community of people who also want to find out.



PHOTOGRAPHY: CAMERON SIMS & SUPPLIED

Right: No Beers? Who Cares! founder Claire Robbie, who says NBWC isn't an anti-alcohol campaign, but a pro-mindfulness initiative. Opposite page: Robbie with NBWC ambassadors, wellness blogger Makaia Carr (far left) and former professional tennis player Sacha Jones.



Giving up wasn't a first for mum-of-one Robbie, who'd done so once before, while living in LA in her twenties, after partying for work and play led to burnout. "I never thought of myself as an alcoholic, but I was a heavy social drinker. And the drinking was the symptom. The problem was I didn't really know who I was and had been taught by society from a young age to drink; there are all these stories that have been created around why it's okay."

Adrift after quitting her job, marriage and drinking in one fell swoop, Robbie joined a friend on a yoga teacher training course, motivated in part by the fact she wouldn't be able to do the Sunday classes if she was hungover. "The combination of giving up alcohol and doing some spiritual work changed my life in such a profound way," she recalls. "Giving up drinking was the best thing I ever did, so I stopped for a couple of years – and then I started again, though not problematically."

Life went on, until push came to shove this New Year's Eve. "Everyone was drunk around me, and I remember feeling lonely and thinking, 'What am I doing? I don't even enjoy this anymore.'"

No Beers? Who Cares! invites people to challenge their habits and ideas around alcohol by signing up to abstain for three to 12 months. Less about what you give up than how much you stand to gain, members can join a Facebook support group, access online tips, and attend events to practise sober socialising and be inspired by speakers including NBWC's ambassadors (among them Green Party candidate and TV host Hayley Holt and advocate for social change Richie Hardcore). There's mindful dating, meditation courses, workshops and outdoor activities. Profits have been donated to the Kindness Institute, and Robbie has other charities in her sights.

NBWC is attracting all sorts: non-drinkers who're keen to find their tribe, through to those for whom alcohol is a bit of an issue. The common thread, says Robbie, is: "Alcohol isn't serving me, I need some support and I want to meet people who feel the same." Another theme is curiosity – people just want to see what happens if they don't drink for a while."

It's Auckland-based for now, but with members from

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Tauranga to Sydney, Robbie hopes to eventually run events far and wide. She's been surprised to learn what a huge problem drinking is for so many Kiwis. "I think it's stopping us reach our potential in a major way. If NBWC can give people a bit more power in terms of their choice, I'll be stoked."

Extra energy, motivation, money, self-awareness – what's not to love about a healthier life on the wagon? Well, it's not all roses, says Robbie. "Life becomes a little more intense if you're not suppressing things with alcohol. But that's what our support group and ambassadors are for, and why it's great to couple it with some internal work, like meditation. You can't just live as a hermit for three months."

With 450 members and counting, NBWC has become much more than a year-long thing for Robbie. She doesn't want to make anyone feel bad about drinking, but for her:

"I love being slightly different, and I'm proud that I don't drink. I feel like it's way cooler not to."

nobeerswhocares.com

THE MIGHTY BOOCH

Think giving up drinking means giving up good drinks? Think again – there's a tasty and healthy option, kombucha, newly on tap in bars around the country. Liv McGregor and Rene Schliebs had been home brewers for years when they decided to turn medical herbalist and nutritionist Rene's Auckland garage into Mama's Brew Shop kombuchery and create two organic flavours: Love and Warrior. Consider swapping alcoholic cocktails for these Mama's Brew Shop combos:

• Muddle 4 lime wedges and a handful of mint in a tall glass. Fill with ice, then add 100ml Love kombucha and top with soda water.

• Muddle 3 orange wedges and 2 slices ginger in a cocktail shaker. Add 100ml coconut water and ice, shake, then strain into a glass and top with Warrior kombucha. Garnish with a slice of orange. mamasbrewshop.com

