

TOP STORY EDITOR'S PICK

These 3 Napa businesses are embracing inclusivity with non-alcoholic drinks

Sarah Dowling Dec 25, 2023 Updated Jan 30, 2024 0



Joel Pfeifle the bar manager at Wilfred's Lounge in Napa prepares a mocktail on Friday, Dec. 8. Nick Otto, Register

Like millions of Americans, Southside Café owners Irma and Morgan Robinson often use the first month of the year as a reset, taking a break from the wine and other alcoholic beverages synonymous with the Napa Valley.

Commonly called “Dry January,” this 31-day sobriety challenge “ended up evolving” for Irma, whose Dry January turned into a Dry February, Dry March, Dry April and never really stopped. It has been two years and counting.

Irma Robinson never actually set an end date for her “dry period” as is typically done with the Dry January model. Instead, she decided to take it one day at a time, asking herself “how alcohol was serving me and not serving me,” she explained, sitting in her Gasser Drive café. Robinson touted the clarity and discipline that came from her decision to stay sober. And there was a lot to think about.

“With everything that happened with the pandemic, I was very clear minded in addressing all the challenges that happened and that could lie ahead,” Robinson said.

Southside has endured many challenges since its 2016 opening. The first Southside café — known as Southside Carneros — was located on Old Sonoma Road. Later, Southside Yountville popped up on Washington Street in Yountville. Southside Century — located at 135 Gasser Drive, Suite B — completed the trifecta in 2019.

Then the coronavirus pandemic hit, the ripple effects of which are still being felt by business owners across the Napa Valley, forcing the Robinsons to reevaluate their multiple locations. Ultimately, Southside Carneros and Southside Yountville closed. Irma noted that Century “has everything we need” and efforts were poured into this location, including its catering operations.

Robinson described Southside as “elevated, fast casual,” noting what sets this eatery apart from others in Napa is its hospitality and chef-driven menu. This model plays to the couple’s strengths: Irma has a background in hospitality, marketing and has worked in wine tasting rooms. Morgan, meanwhile, is a classically-trained chef.

While the food menu features breakfast and lunch staples such as avocado toasts, biscuits and gravy, lunch soups, salads and sandwiches, the beverage menu has evolved with an “NA” — non-alcoholic — focus. Robinson clarified that although they will always have some wines and other alcoholic options, she wanted to explore NA beverages and provide guests who are sober or “sober curious” some tasty options. NA should not just equal a glass of juice, Robinson said.



Wilfred's Lounge mocktail "Watermelon Sugar" is seen on Friday, Dec. 8. Nick Otto, Register

In wine country, “zero proof” is likely a foreign concept to many. With Robinson’s wine background, there was certainly a learning curve when it comes to non-alcoholic beers, wines, spirits and bitters. This Pandora’s box of liquid offerings is one Robinson excitedly opened — many of these zero proof products are on display at Southside, available for purchase.

Southside’s NA menu includes a few beers from Athletic Brewing Co.; Curious Elixir No. 1 — a “pomegranate cocktail inspired by the negroni;” an Espresso Martini — Despierta Blend Espresso, Ritual Rum Alternative, Pathfinder, All the Bitter Aromatic Bitters; a Spicy Pineapple Mezcal Margarita — Cut Above Mezcal, house-made Cointreau, pineapple juice, fresh orange juice, lime juice; a Gin & Tonic — Monday zero-proof gin, Betty Buzz Tonic, fresh lime, kaffir lime leaves, marigold blossom, juniper berries and more.

Robinson emphasized there are a lot of reasons people choose not to drink, whether it is “just today, or every day.” Southside has options.

For Joel Pfeifle, bar manager at Wilfred’s Lounge in downtown Napa, it is all about “inclusiveness vs. exclusiveness” and creating a welcoming environment for everyone.



Joel Pfeifle the bar manager at Wilfred's Lounge in Napa garnishes the mocktail "Ube-bae-baby!" with nutmeg on Friday, Dec. 8. Nick Otto, Register

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“There are so many people and a multitude of reasons not to drink,” he said. “I don’t need to know your reason.”

From the designated driver to the expectant mother and everyone in between, Wilfred’s welcomes all.

However, the lounge with the tagline “island-inspired cocktails and cuisine” almost had a very different concept.

Downtown Napa had been home to many wine tasting rooms when Nat Komes and his father decided to buy the abandoned BurgerFi restaurant with a riverfront view that had been vacant for three years. The original intent was to add another tasting room at the 967 First St. space, but Komes decided to create “something for the locals,” he recalled during a recent interview.

Komes has always enjoyed a good Tiki bar, from those across the Bay Area to the “enchanted” variety within Disneyland, these themed establishments are “a good place to unwind.” Wilfred’s modern take on the Tiki bar may bend a few of the Tiki “rules,” but Komes and crew have succeeded in adding something different to downtown Napa’s dining scene.



Wilfred's Lounge mocktail "Toucan Sham" is seen on Friday, Dec. 8. Nick Otto, Register

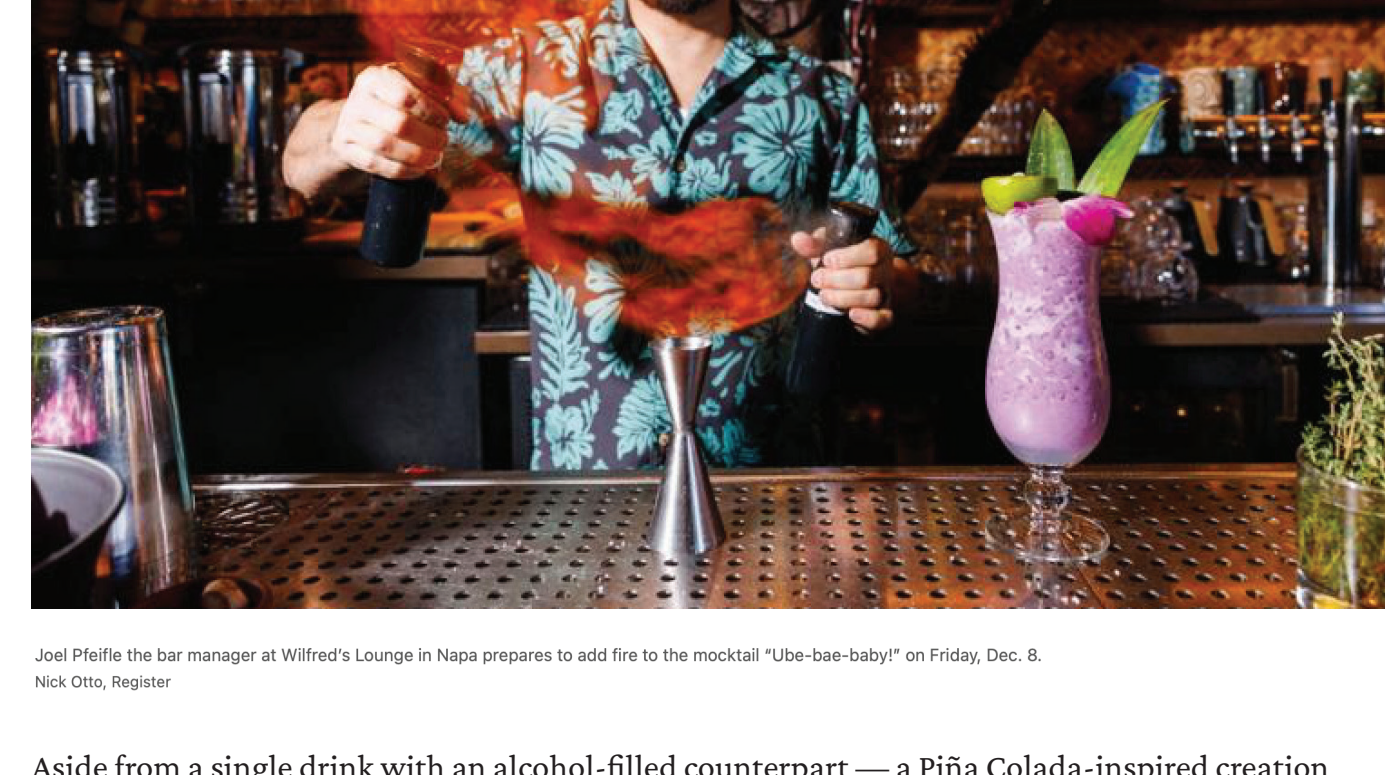
Pfeifle has tended bar for over 20 years, joining the Wildred’s team before the Tiki bar officially opened in October 2021. Using Hawaiian culture and the Tiki community as a guide, Pfeifle crafted a beverage menu that includes a lot of fruit- and juice-infused cocktails as well as classics like Mai Tais and Tahitian punch.

“It’s tropical,” he said simply. “I want you to feel like you are on vacation” outside of wine country, of course.

The non-alcoholic mocktail menu was added to extend to anyone, even the children who frequent the family friendly eatery.

One Tiki rule — well perhaps more like Pfeifle’s rules — is to be able to light the cocktails using 151 proof rum and sometimes cinnamon to “provide some sparks when a drink calls for it,” he explained.

For the mocktails, the bar-side fireworks are achieved using sugar cubes soaked in lemon extract, and we “put them into our hollowed-out lime shells from our daily juicing. We can float these over most of our drinks. They will light for about a minute with a bright flame that we can use as a base for playing with or simply for someone to enjoy,” Pfeifle said.



Joel Pfeifle the bar manager at Wilfred's Lounge in Napa prepares to add fire to the mocktail "Ube-bae-baby!" on Friday, Dec. 8. Nick Otto, Register

Aside from a single drink with an alcohol-filled counterpart — a Piña Colada-inspired creation called Ube-Bae-Baby! — Pfeifle approached the mocktail menu with fresh eyes.

“Everything else is original,” he said, axing Ube-Bae-Baby! from the list. “I looked at balancing these as standalone drinks. Not looking to overpower.”

What remains?

Toucan Sham is a combination of passionfruit, vanilla, pandan, coconut cream, lime, soda that “tastes like Fruit Loops,” according to Pfeifle.

Banana Dreams is described as creamy without the addition of dairy. It features — you guessed it, banana — but also pineapple, grapefruit, lime and fassionola.

The Island Soda contains guava, grapefruit, Jamaican chili spice and soda.

The newest mocktail is called Watermelon Sugar and contains watermelon, ginger ale, spice #1, lemon and mint.

“All of these have fresh juices, and we are making them everyday,” Pfeifle said, adding that Wilfred’s juices three or four cases of pineapples per day for drinks across its menu.

There are plans to expand Wilfred’s mocktail menu in the near future.

Andrew Salazar, bar director at The Fink in downtown Napa, is still working on expanding not just the non-alcoholic beverage menu, but the complete menu. The Fink — located at 530 Main St. at the Napa River Inn — opened in June and according to owner Judd Finkelstein has been pretty busy.

“The community has embraced us,” Finkelstein said, sitting in a cozy, red booth at his business. “Look around.”

He gestured to the locals flooding into the bar on a recent Wednesday evening, noting that they “get a good mix” of people from the Napa Valley and those just visiting. The proximity to the hotel aids this clientele.

Finkelstein and Salazar — like Robinson and Pfeifle — highlighted the importance of inclusivity in crafting a cocktail menu.

For Salazar, who has close to 20 years of experience, it was important for the NA options at The Fink to stand on their own and “not (be) an afterthought.” Instead, he wants “care and thought put in.”

Salazar noted that sometimes guests request a non-alcoholic drink by ordering an ordinary cocktail and asking that the vodka, rum, etc. be removed. This is problematic for most drinks because all you could be left with is a little lime juice, for example. Instead, Salazar is working on an NA menu that embraces flavor without having to do any mental gymnastics of what will happen once the alcohol is removed.

For now, The Fink offers the following:

Island Breeze: Pineapple, orange, almond, and ginger.

Stone Sour: House-made cherry shrub and fresh citrus.

Ruby’s Usual: A fizzy ginger-laden long drink with cucumber and mint.

Ruby, for those curious, is Finkelstein’s daughter. Now 13, Ruby used to ask for NA drinks from Salazar when he was working at Napa’s Kitchen Door restaurant. The ginger, cucumber mint creation became her usual.

Finkelstein views his bar as more than just a place to consume alcohol. It can be a place to connect with folks over a drink — any drink — or to collect one’s thoughts alone.

“We want to be as inclusive as possible and show you a good time,” he said.