Abstract

Motivation for choosing this topic

"Gen Z is no longer drinking alcohol."
For the past few years, this statement has echoed throughout the wine and spirits industry. Yet the reality appears far more complex than a simple generational shift. Across many markets, consumers are drinking differently. Growing concerns about health and wellbeing, increasing interest in moderation, and changing expectations around inclusivity are reshaping the role of alcohol in social and celebratory occasions. At the same time, a new generation of products, including dealcoholised wines, premium sparkling teas and alcohol-free sparkling beverages, is experiencing rapid growth.

Problem/ objective

But what happens when the celebration remains while alcohol slowly disappears from the glass?

Can the symbolic and emotional value traditionally associated with Champagne survive independently of alcohol? Can alcohol-free sparkling beverages reproduce the same sense of celebration, ritual and belonging? Do consumers abandon celebration, or are they simply redefining it?

This thesis was born from these questions.

For centuries, Champagne was successfully associated with luxury, success, prestige and celebration. Through royal endorsement, historical events, luxury branding and highly ritualised consumption, it has become far more than a sparkling wine. Champagne has evolved into a cultural symbol and a benchmark against which all other sparkling wines are measured. Over time, many sparkling wine categories have adopted elements of this symbolic language. Prosecco, Cava, Crémant, Franciacorta and English sparkling wine all utilise some of the visual, sensory and ritual cues historically associated with Champagne. More recently, alcohol-free sparkling beverages have begun to do the same.

This thesis explores how Champagne became the world's dominant celebratory beverage and examines whether its symbolic codes can be transmitted to alcohol-free alternatives. It also investigates how other sparkling wine categories have adopted Champagne's celebratory cues and evaluates the extent to which they have achieved comparable recognition as drinks of celebration. The objective is not simply to understand changing alcohol consumption, but to determine whether the cultural meaning of celebration can be separated from alcohol itself.

Methodology

The research combines both secondary and primary sources. Academic literature, historical documents, books and industry publications were used to investigate the historical development of Champagne, the role of rituals in creating emotional value, changing consumer behaviour and the emergence of alcohol-free beverages. Primary research consisted of five semi-structured expert interviews conducted with professionals from different areas of the wine industry, including wine education, sales, journalism, digital content creation and design within the Champagne sector. In addition, an exploratory tasting of selected premium alcohol-free sparkling beverages, including dealcoholised sparkling

wines and sparkling teas, was undertaken to assess their ability to reproduce the sensory and symbolic elements associated with celebratory drinking occasions.

Content

The thesis is divided into five sections.

The first examines how Champagne became the world's leading celebratory drink through its association with royalty, luxury, historical events and effective brand building.

The second explores the rituals of Champagne and sparkling wine, demonstrating how practices such as cork popping, toasting and bottle presentation contribute to emotional value and social connection.

The third section analyses how other sparkling wine categories, including Prosecco, Cava, Franciacorta and English sparkling wine, have adopted Champagne's celebratory codes with varying degrees of success.

The fourth examines changing consumer behaviour and the growing demand for alcohol-free alternatives, highlighting the influence of health, moderation and inclusivity, as well as gaps in current research.

The final section evaluates alcohol-free sparkling wines and sparkling teas as potential celebratory beverages. Drawing on expert interviews and an exploratory tasting, it assesses their ability to reproduce the sensory, ritualistic and symbolic elements traditionally associated with Champagne.

Conclusion

The findings of this study demonstrate that Champagne's success extends far beyond product quality. Its position as the world's celebratory drink is the result of centuries of symbolic construction supported by royal endorsement, luxury positioning, cultural associations and powerful consumption rituals. While other sparkling wines have adopted many of these celebratory codes, none has fully replicated Champagne's global legitimacy and symbolic status.

The research also suggests that alcohol-free sparkling beverages are more likely to complement rather than replace Champagne. Their greatest strength lies in promoting inclusion and enabling participation in celebratory occasions regardless of alcohol consumption. Although many successfully reproduce visual and ritualistic aspects of celebration, they have not yet achieved the cultural significance and legitimacy that Champagne has accumulated over centuries.

The thesis concludes that the future of celebration is likely to become increasingly inclusive rather than alcohol-free. The codes of celebration appear capable of evolving beyond alcohol itself, but the long-term success of alcohol-free celebratory beverages will depend not on how closely they imitate Champagne, but on their ability to establish a recognised and convincing identity of their own. This challenge extends beyond alcohol-free alternatives and applies equally to all emerging celebratory beverage categories seeking legitimacy in a market still largely defined by Champagne.