



FOOD



Spirits are high at The Volstead, Philly's only sober bar

“It’s like ‘Cheers’ without the hangover.”



Unity Restaurants dir. of operations Tricia Vasinda works the bar and chats with guests at The Volstead by Unity.

Elizabeth Robertson / Staff Photographer

by Rita Giordano

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The weather outside was frightful, but the warmth of the Main Street bar was so delightful, that one after the other, merry revelers came out of the cold Manayunk night last week to share some season's cheer at The Volstead.

From the cozy, edgy-chic space arose the sounds of laughter, the chatter of holiday plans, and, of course, plenty of happy imbibing: a seasonal Partridge in a Pear Tree, swanky Manhattans, and, being Philly, the requisite down-and-dirty Citywide Special.

All the festivity you'd expect at a holiday gathering. Except for one thing.

None of those drinks had alcohol. Not a drop.

The Volstead is Philadelphia's only zero-proof bar. Since it opened last March, its patrons have cheered on the Phillies and the Eagles while hoisting sober brews. They've dined from its modern vegan menu, toasted birthdays, and struck up acquaintances.

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This Saturday, [The Volstead](#) will host a [Zero Proof New Year's Eve Party](#), ringing in 2023 with nonalcoholic sparkling wine and the kind of high spirits that only come from within. The restaurant will be open for dinner and bar snacks, there will be NA drink specials, and no reservations are required. Closing time is 12:30 a.m.

While The Volstead may be unique for Philly, it is part of a growing social space where people come together without consuming alcohol. Sober bars have opened in metro areas like Austin, Brooklyn, Denver, and San Francisco. Even Dublin, Ireland, known for its pub culture, has the zero-proof [Virgin Mary Bar](#). Food and Wine magazine recently wrote about [Hekate](#), NYC's first sober dive bar, located in the East Village.

The Sober Curious movement — which suggests that people question their relationship with alcohol — has been around for a while. But the COVID-19 pandemic and alcohol excesses during lockdown caused some people to take a hard look at their drinking. In fiscal year 2020-21, the [Pennsylvania Liquor Control Board](#) reported record-breaking sales. With many bars and restaurants still on limited operation, it was clear that the sales boost was coming from increases in people drinking at home.

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Meanwhile, [manufacturers of zero- \(or close to it\) proof beers, wines, elixirs, and spirits — whiskey, bourbon, tequila, and gin](#) — have come out with products far better than those of the past. And more [restaurants and bars are upping their nonalcoholic game](#).

But is a bar without alcohol still a bar?

“There’s a social lubricant effect,” said Robert Ashford, who co-owns The Volstead with his wife, Arielle. “People get more vocal and boisterous. They’re having fun. What you don’t have is all the negative aspects. People aren’t getting into fights. You’re not seeing people walk out on tabs.”

About three years ago, the Ashfords, both sober, began Unity, a family of enterprises aimed at supporting other people in recovery. The company now operates recovery community centers, yoga studios, a taco eatery, The Volstead, and, in the new year, a cafe. Most of their staff are in recovery or were previously incarcerated.

The origin of the Volstead, named after the act that started Prohibition, lies in Robert Ashford’s pre-recovery dream of opening a speakeasy, complete with a secret entrance and craft cocktails. His own troubles with intoxicating substances led him instead to treatment and recovery. Several years later, with the Unity enterprises underway and high-quality nonalcoholic products increasingly available, the Ashfords decided to embark on a different Volstead.

Its clientele might surprise some people.

About half of The Volstead's patrons are in recovery, but many aren't. They come to a zero-proof bar for lots of reasons. Some people are foregoing alcohol for health reasons, such as pregnancy or nursing. Some are athletes.

Others say they like having the choice. They want alcoholic drinks at times, but also enjoy tasty, buzz-less alternatives.

"We do have quite a few people who come with dates," said operations manager Tricia Vasinda. "It's a good place where they can actually have a conversation and not be influenced by alcohol, so they really get to know the person."

Sober-friendly environment

Some found what they liked most about pubs wasn't really the intoxicants.

Kellan White isn't a teetotaler, but he'd tried the Dry January route to take a break from alcohol. But many of the alcohol-free drinks he ordered were juices and spritzers that felt like afterthoughts. and seemed like a waste of money.

Then he tried The Volstead. He and his fiancée, Lindsay Mareau, loved the food, the caliber of the drinks, and the vibe.

“It’s like *Cheers* without the hangover,” said White, who is Philly mayoral candidate Rebecca Rhynhart’s campaign manager. He realized what he really enjoyed about pubs.

“I’ve learned it wasn’t ever about getting drunk or the alcohol,” he said. “The Volstead has opened my eyes: It’s about building community.” He has become a regular.

Justin Mendoza, a therapist and health coach who’s also a Volstead regular, started *Queers and NA Beers*, a monthly social event held at the bar. Last week was its holiday get-together. He said The Volstead fills a special niche.

“The LGBTQ+ community having a safe sober space is really rare,” said Mendoza. “It’s really needed.”

The same night as his group’s holiday social, Daniela Diaz and Mike Shipp made a stop at The Volstead’s bottle shop. In Philly, more retailers are selling

nonalcoholic options, and zero-proof shops are cropping in other cities.

[Boisson](#), for example, has 10 shops in New York and California.

Since Diaz and Shipp moved to Philly last spring, The Volstead has become of their favorite discoveries.

“We were so excited to move to a city that had a place like this one,” said Diaz, a federal policy consultant who enjoys both nonalcoholic and alcoholic beverages. “It’s been a revelation.”

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Rebekah Ruark and their girlfriend, Liz Malazita, were enjoying alcohol-free drinks and laughs at the other end of the bar.

“I remember just counting down the days until it opened,” said Ruark, who is in recovery and plans to celebrate their next birthday at The Volstead.

For Ruark, a marketing professional, The Volstead is a safe, fun way to enjoy what they found attractive about bars before sobriety — a night out, dressing up, connecting with people.

NA bars can help people realize sobriety isn’t the end of fun, they said.

“I think that’s the biggest untruth about sobriety — that people are convinced their life is going to change for the worse instead of for the better,” they said.

“That’s just fear.”

It remains to be seen how Philly takes to the dry bar trend. Last week, The Volstead’s bar was lively. But at times, would-be patrons have left when they learn there’s no alcohol.

Myriam Bloom, an artist, was sipping drinks at last week's LGBTQ+ get-together. She and her partner, who partake both NA and alcoholic beverages, are Volstead fans, and they have served friends zero-proof spirits at home to positive reviews. Bloom has encouraged them to give the bar a try.

“I would love for The Volstead to continue and be successful,” said Bloom, laughing, “so I could be able to keep going.”

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