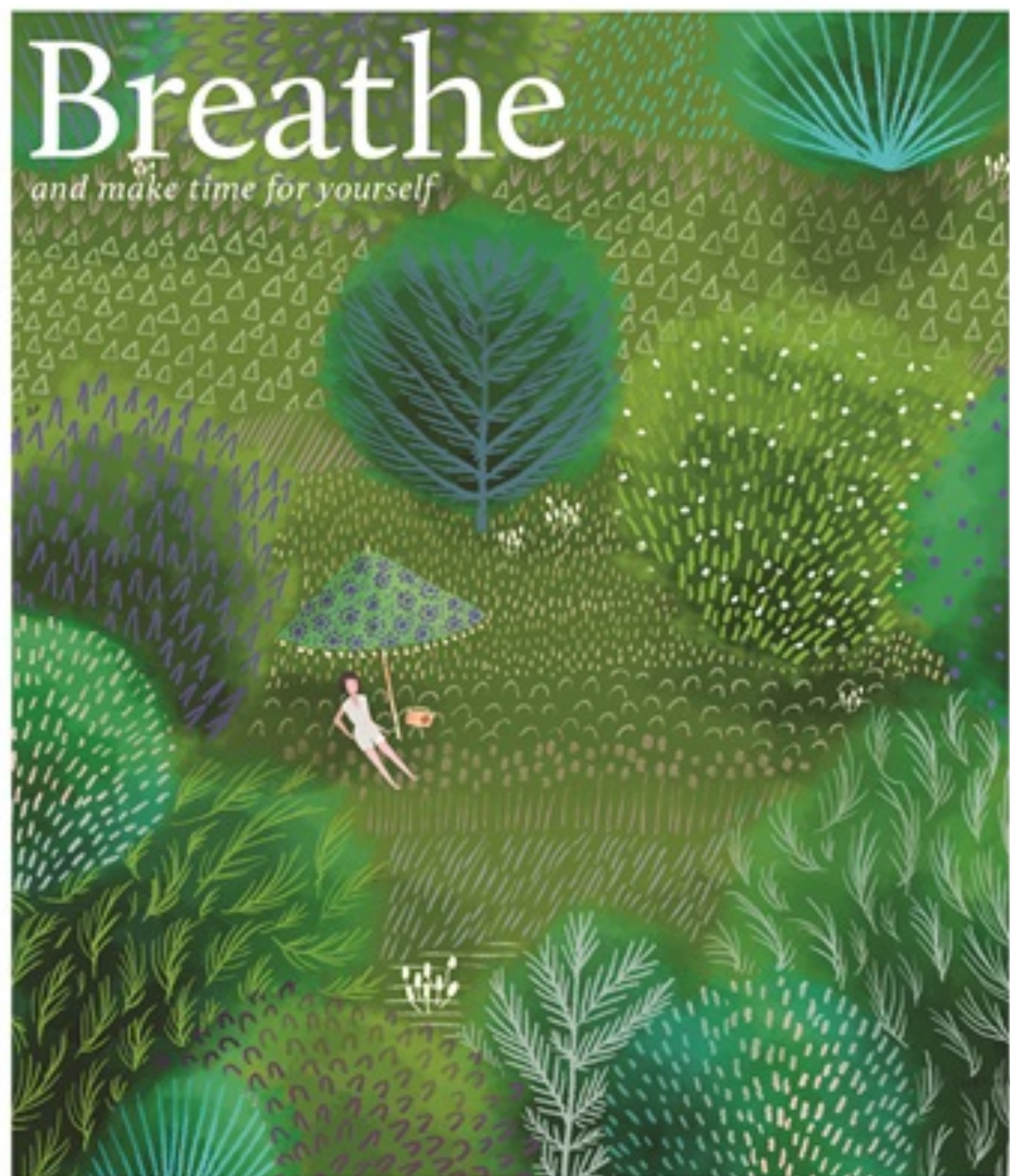


WELLBEING • MINDFULNESS • CREATIVITY • ESCAPING



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New orders

Pubs and socialising go hand in hand, which can be difficult for anyone who's teetotal or just looking to cut down on their alcohol intake and is unimpressed by the soft-drink alternatives on offer. There is a way, however, to combine a healthy approach to drinking and still spend a night out on the town with friends – welcome to the mindful pub crawl

Laura Willoughby has filled her mug of herbal tea a touch too much and it's sloshing over the top. 'You see, it doesn't matter what it is, I can't hold my drink,' she jokes.

Laura is the founder of Club Soda, a self-styled 'mindful drinking movement' which aims to give people the tools to help them either give up alcohol altogether or moderate their intake. She is teetotal these days. 'I found my off-switch broke when I was 35 and I don't think I'd find it was magically fixed if I started drinking again now,' she says.

The club offers online courses to help people change their drinking habits, flags up interesting low-alcohol and soft drinks independently reviewed by members, produces a pub guide that ranks bars according to how mindful drinking-friendly they are, and has even organised mindful pub crawls. In August it's hosting the first Mindful Drinking Festival, a free event in London, where trendy low-alcohol and soft drinks companies will show their wares (see far right).

But what exactly is mindful drinking? 'We're not anti-alcohol,' asserts Laura. 'We're a positive movement about embracing a lifestyle and health change that you can enjoy rather than being about legislation and doom and gloom.'

Nor is it intended as a substitute for medical help for those who are alcohol dependent. And, importantly, it's not a front for self-interested health lobbyists or the soft drinks industry.

Laura and co-founder Jussi Tolvi have given up their jobs in the public sector and the City to get it off the ground with a loan, their savings and a modest investment from a small business accelerator organisation in east London.

'It's mindful with a small "m",' says Laura who likens it to 'Weight Watchers, but for booze', helping people to train themselves to choose a soft drink over a pint or an Eisberg over an ice wine.

Every programme needs a good acronym, and Club Soda's is WOOP, standing for Wish-Obstacle-Outcome-Plan: members who sign up for courses are encouraged to set their own clear goals, identify barriers such as peer pressure that might stop those being achieved, focus on the benefits from moderating their alcohol intake and devise strategies to achieve them.

Mindfulness with a big 'M' is important for some members who practise yoga or meditation but it isn't an integral part of the mindful drinking concept.

Jussi says that taking up mindfulness meditation helped him recognise that his relationship with alcohol was something he wanted to change.

'My drinking was a binge,' he says. 'I might only drink once a week but when I did it was very hard to stop.'

He still practises every day, but is keen that Club Soda doesn't encourage people to take up 'lots of crazy meditation'.

But there is a crossover in that, like meditation, mindful drinking works best when it is complemented by a commitment to daily practice.

'If you're trying to change any habit you have to invest time,' says Laura. 'What you're practising in this instance is not doing something, so you have to have a plan for how you're going to respond to any triggers during the day or surf any urges or discomfort at those points. We encourage people to set aside some time to really think about it and plan.'

'Willpower doesn't really exist. You can't just white-knuckle it and hope that things will change. Change takes energy, time and practice.'

'It's not about clearing your mind and suddenly everything becomes perfect. It's about becoming disciplined in your thinking and seeing your change in drinking as a journey – and learning a lot about yourself along the way.'

'The most important thing is we don't tell anyone what their goals are,' says Laura. This explains why WOOP welcomes people who wish to be teetotal as well as those wanting to cut down.

'If you're dependent [on alcohol] you need medical help but there are a whole load of us in the middle who aren't. I have various words, but a to use a printable one: we're idiots.'

'Moderation is an achievable goal for some people who aren't ready to give up forever. Forever seems like a long time.'

'Some members want to give it a go and see if they can moderate before they decide they need to go for a bigger period of being alcohol-free.'

'We want to work with people wherever they are in the process. There's no point in trying to make someone do something they don't want to do. It doesn't work.'

Sceptics might look at things like pub guides and bar crawls as red rags to a bull for people who have issues around alcohol but Laura insists that Club Soda wants to help people reframe their relationship with alcohol without trading in their entire social life. After all, for many people the pub plays an important part in get-togethers with friends and family.

'Often our events are in a pub because mindful drinking is about practising new behaviours in a familiar setting. Our members aren't people who need to avoid the pub – they're people who need to learn how to avoid alcohol in a pub.'

'Social spaces with alcohol are very hard to avoid. Most people don't want to avoid them. And you don't have to avoid them, you just have to tame them.'

For a lot of people Dry January is a starting point for all this stuff and Laura says there is a membership surge in February from those who want to go longer or who failed to see it through to the end of the month and need an extra nudge and support to keep going in the right direction.

'I believe strongly that taking a break teaches you a lot about where your triggers are, where your habitual drinking is and where all those psychological links with alcohol are. But it takes a long time to unpick those automatic reflexes that tell you you're missing something by not having a drink.'

January was peak season for mindful pub crawls too, but they might have a different feel next year.

'We might go for a mindful lock-in,' says Laura, 'so we don't have to crawl between pubs.'

Words: Nigel Huddleston

THREE MODERN LOW-ALCOHOL ALTERNATIVES

Big Drop

This east London start-up is a craft brewery with a difference: everything it makes is less than 0.5% abv. Its Chocolate Milk Stout is sold in Draft House bars in London and Milton Keynes and it has just released a Citrus Pale Ale.

Seedlip

Billed as the world's first non-alcoholic spirit, Seedlip is made in the type of copper pot stills more usually associated with fine whisky or Cognac. It comes in two versions: spice, cardamom, oak, lemon and grapefruit, or peas, hay, spearmint, rosemary and thyme. Usually served with tonic it's sold in Harvey Nichols, Selfridges and Heston Blumenthal's Fat Duck.

Nanny State

Cult craft brewer Brewdog's low-alcohol beer takes a pop at neo-prohibitionists and packs a flavoursome punch thanks to eight types of malt and four varieties of American hop.



The Mindful Drinking Festival takes place at the Bermondsey Square boutique hotel in London SE1 on Sunday, 13 August, from noon until 6pm.

The event hopes to give mindful drinkers the chance to sample lots of cutting-edge products in one place, so they know what they like when they go into an environment where they would normally drink alcohol.

It will include the best in low- and non-alcohol craft beers and wines, low-sugar sodas and infusions. There will also be tutored tastings, masterclasses from beer experts and sommeliers, mixology demonstrations and advice on pairing drinks with food.

The aim is to steer people in the direction of healthy, tasty drink options. 'It's like the difference between a burger from a van in a layby and a gourmet burger in Byron,' says Laura.

Entry is free. For more details, go to mindfuldrinkingfestival.com. For information about Club Soda and its courses, visit joinclubsoda.co.uk.