



teetotal twentysomethings.

Why more women are choosing sobriety over getting smashed.

Ellie, a 25-year-old graphic designer, is all dolled up for a night on the town. She meets her girlfriends at a club, eyes the area for any notable male talent, then heads to the bar. While her buddies shoot off a round of Bellini and white wine orders, she tells the barman, "Diet Coke" - because Ellie is a teetotaler.

"I've never enjoyed the taste of alcohol and I can't understand why you'd want to do something that makes you feel like crap the next day," she explains. "I also don't like to lose control, especially if I'm at risk of making bad decisions or hurting myself getting home."

While Ellie has never boarded the booze bus, Claire Falloon, 29, musician and blogger (myyearoffthepiss.blogspot.com), made a conscious decision to get off - and in the middle of a foul hangover, no less. Sure, we've all made the "I'm never drinking again!" speech the morning after, but Claire actually walked her talk. "I had enough of the effect alcohol was having on my body and skin, and was really tired of waking up and feeling ashamed of the way I behaved the night before," she says.

dry spell

It's not just everyday girls who are swearing off booze. *Gossip Girl* star Blake Lively has been quoted saying that she doesn't drink, and both Peaches Geldof and singer Leona Lewis have done teetotal stints. It's a trend that's slowly growing in popularity among twentysomething women, according to Professor Steve Allsop from the National Drug Research Institute in Perth.

The most recent National Drug Strategy Household Survey reports that 10.1 per cent of Australians are teetotalers - an increase on the 9.3 per cent who said they didn't drink a few years earlier. Allsop cites the "healthy living" movement as a factor driving the numbers up, as people are becoming more concerned about what they put in their bodies (Exhibit A: the interest in organics), as well as the number of Aussies who grew up in families troubled by alcohol. "There's a significant group who don't drink because it really screwed up their home life, or they saw it have a terrible impact on one of their friends," says Allsop. "Religious beliefs can also play a part in this decision."

our drinking culture

"Most Aussies don't know how to socialise without alcohol, myself included," says Claire. "I'm pretty shy, so trying to meet men stone-cold sober is

kind of nightmarish. Once, at a house party, a guy I liked said 'Hi' and I just awkwardly walked out of the room!"

Ellie has also had a few booze-related dating hiccups. "A guy asked me if I'd like to come to his place for a home-cooked meal and a nice bottle of red wine. I was like, 'Could you please get a nice bottle of Coke instead?'. Really romantic. It can also be frustrating when a date takes you to a wedding or birthday and he drinks to oblivion. I always end up feeling like the boring sober one, or like I should be sitting at the kids table."

Claire and Ellie find themselves in

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booze bullies

Choosing not to drink in such a saturated culture raises questions. "When people find out that I'm a teetotaler, they're usually shocked," says Claire. "They assume that I'm boring. Even my supportive friends have said, 'I can't wait until you start drinking again so we can have the old you back' - which is pretty insulting when you think about it."

Allsop confirms that the pressure to drink in Australian culture is huge and booze bullies are common. "We pressure our friends to

drink because we don't like people who are different from us. But alcohol is an extraordinary drug, and as a society we need to learn to respect people's right not to drink, whether it's just for one night or all the time."

Allsop points out that any time someone says they don't want to drink, the automatic question is "Why not?". However, the reason might be deeply personal and uncomfortable to share. Even if it's not, it's no-one's business

these situations because alcohol is imbued with heavy symbolism in Australian society; it's synonymous with celebration, commiseration, the end of the working day and even creativity. "One boss of mine liked to hold brainstorming sessions at the pub after work," says Claire. "I didn't go very often, and when I did, I'd drink mineral water. It definitely affected my working relationship with him; he was a lot more friendly with his hardcore drinking buddies. We even had an alcohol company client who I couldn't work with," she says. "It was only after I stopped drinking that I noticed how much booze we get plied with in the workplace. Why don't we get healthy rewards instead, like an afternoon off to go and relax?"

Claire makes a good point, but as grog becomes cheaper, more readily available, and more intensely promoted, she's swimming against a strong current. In addition, most people simply like the feeling of being drunk and uninhibited, as Allsop explains, "Many Aussies use alcohol as a passport to do things they'd normally be too shy for, like chatting someone up or going dancing."

anyway. "You have to justify your decision not to drink, when perhaps it should be the other way around," he says.

For Ellie, a night on the town with the girls holds no less shine because she's not drinking. "I find it really easy to tune in to the party vibe when people around me are drinking and I'm sober. Plus I can drive home, so I never have to compete with a million trashed people waiting for a taxi," she says. It's a win/win situation as far as she's concerned. ➤