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TOP
SUMMER
DRINKS
TESTED

It's thirsty work ...

Roz Crowley

THE summer weather may be hit-and-miss, but the temperatures are up, and with it the need to slake a thirst. An ice cold cider or chilled sparkling wine will nearly always hit the spot. But for those who are watching their weight, alcohol intake, or simply want to keep a clear head, there are lots of low- or non-alcoholic drinks on the shelves.

Having tasted what we found for this survey, I would encourage you to make simple lemonades and cordials, such as elderflower, and add some sparkling water and a slice of lemon for an alcohol-free drink.

Those wanting a low-alcohol drink are not well-served, with poor versions of wines which are not well made. Perhaps they need the kick of alcohol to make them taste better, but it seems no effort is made to provide a fruit depth, or any kind of structure to keep our interest and provide something to go well with food.

The solution may be to add sparkling or still water to regular wines, or to drink less of a good wine, alternating with a large glass of water.

Cider usually has about 5% alcohol, which is about half that of light wines, so we tried some for our final eight. ■■

**Longueville House Cider, 500ml, €3.99**

Made in Mallow, Co Cork, this was easily the most refreshing drink we sampled and the best one to have with food. Fruity and just a little dry, it was delicious. Alcohol at 5% means this size bottle, without food, would put us over the drink-driving limit. You will get two good glass-fulls.

Score: 9**Fentiman's ginger beer, 750ml, €3.92**

Botanically brewed ginger root has additional flavouring, with extracts of speedwell and yarrow, as well as pear-juice concentrate. Plenty of fizz here, great aromas and fresh ginger, with lots of lingering flavour. Delicious for those who love ginger, and a refreshing drink on ice. Not more than 0.9% alcohol.

Score: 7.5**Tesco Finest White Grape & Elderflower Spritz, 750ml, €1.79**

This carbonated spring water has 27% grape juice with elderflower extract. There is very little elderflower, some fresh grape flavour, and it is quite sweet, but not cloying. Alcohol-free.

Score: 7**Bulmers Spiced Apple and Rhubarb, 500ml, €2.63**

This Irish cider is interestingly blended with natural rhubarb and cinnamon flavourings. The rhubarb is barely, if at all, discernible, but tasters noticed the cinnamon. The apple flavour is low, too, so overall disappointing. Alcohol is 4%.

Score: 5.25**Belletti Bellini cocktail with frizzante and peach, 750ml, €3.99**

This version of the Italian Bellini cocktail, made from sparkling wine and crushed peaches, comes from Aldi. Foil covers what first appears to be a Champagne-style cork, but underneath is a screw cap, which means it can be stoppered to keep its fizz. Sulphites are listed, so watch sensitivity. A lightly carbonated drink, it's like a salmon-coloured lemonade. It's quite pleasantly peachy and more sweet than anything. The 4% alcohol is difficult to notice, so be careful not to over-indulge.

Score: 5.5**Marks & Spencer Sparkling White Grape Juice, 750ml, €3.79**

There was a satisfying pop as we opened this proper Champagne cork, and wire tie, for this sweet drink. It has a cloying, sherry-like flavour, as if it had been left for quite a while in old oak. The label says it is made from white grapes, including the Trebbiano variety. This is a grape used in the making of Cognac and balsamic vinegar. The colour is quite dark for a white wine, suggesting age too. Alcohol-free.

Score: 5**Schloer white grape, raspberry & cranberry sparkling juice drink, 750ml, €2.75**

Quite red, with 5% raspberry juice and 3% cranberry juice added to 16% white-grape juice, the raspberry flavour overpowers and it tastes of raspberry wine gums — sweet and a little cloying. Pleasant enough, but not ideal with savoury food. Alcohol-free.

Score: 5**West Coast Cooler original, 750ml, €5.75**

Its lace-pattern overlay, by Simone Rocha, adds to the festive feel of this drink made from wine with exotic fruit flavours. There are sulphites here, so watch if you have a sensitivity. Made in Ireland, some of the fruit flavours taste more of wine gums than natural fruits. No wine flavour, just sweetness. Alcohol of 4% is deceptive with the sweetness. Expensive for the quality.

Score: 4