

20 Things You Notice When You're Not Drinking

December is tipsy season—so how does all our boozy flirting and fun look to someone *without* beer goggles on? Writer Sarah Hepola has seen it all, and was sober enough to take notes.

by Sarah Hepola

For years, I loved drinking my way through the holidays. I loved the way I looked in a slinky, silky party dress with a martini in my hand. I loved how liquor with a big bow on it could change the trajectory of any awkward gathering, how that bottle could make all of us—friends, bosses, colleagues I only halfway liked—light up inside like a Christmas tree.

But as I grew older, I began noticing that it was harder to shake off a hangover, that two glasses of red wine turned into five, which turned into an email the next day that began “I’m so sorry about....” What had once been a fun excuse to cut loose began to feel more like a *need*. I loved losing myself in alcohol, but I was starting to lose myself, period.

(Why Your Favorite Drink May Make You Tipsier Than You Expect)

And so I quit drinking. It isn’t easy to avoid alcohol during the holidays. Sometimes I feel like Santa Claus himself wants nothing but to sit me on his lap and pour tequila down my throat. Not drinking, however, awakened me to so much that I’d never seen before; I notice things that flew right past me when I was sloppy with bourbon cocktails. Among my observations:

1. People aren’t attractive when they drink a lot. This is particularly bittersweet, of course, since most of us drink to feel prettier. The smeared eyeliner, the teeth stained red-wine purple, the staggering to the bathroom: Even the most devastating woman at the party looks bad falling off a bar stool.
2. Not drinking is the best diet in the world. And when you stop drinking, people will not shut up about how good your skin looks.
3. It’s very easy to tuck your skirt into your underpants accidentally when you are drunk, and I notice that I never, ever do this sober.
4. The peer pressure you think will exist if you stop drinking? It really doesn’t. What you realize is that most people don’t care. They can’t tell whether that glass of sparkling water with lime is actually a vodka tonic or whether your Diet Coke has rum in it.
5. People who *do* pay attention to what’s in your glass are generally people with alcohol issues.
6. I don’t think I’ll ever find a faster, better way to relax than having a glass of red wine. Then again, I don’t think I’ll ever again have the effortless blond curls I did as a toddler. Oh, well. Being a grown-up is hard.
7. It’s surprisingly easy to talk to people when not drinking. I used to fret that without liquid courage, I wouldn’t be clever and charming at holiday parties. What would I say? How would I make people laugh? Sober, I managed well, actually. What you notice is that most people at the holiday party are also trying to be charming and clever, and they enjoy it when you laugh at *their* jokes and ask about *their* lives.
8. Conversations without alcohol can be astonishing. Without the distraction and numbness of two cocktails, I found that when friends told me their secrets, I remembered them.

9. Yet after about three drinks, people don't listen so well. I used to imagine myself to be an empathetic listener—the party's own Oprah. But when I talk to someone who's a quarter dozen in, I usually find that he's interruptible, combative, brash—the party's own Geraldo Rivera.

10. Related: Drunk people talk much louder than they need to, and their jokes are not nearly as funny as they think.

11. I've noticed how easy it is to leave. I have no guilt about driving home or unattaching myself if I'm bored or tired or have to work the next day, instead of staying until the bottles have all been drained and suggesting we make a beer run for more.

12. The infamous stress of the holidays—the presents you have to buy, the people you must see—becomes far more manageable when you are not nursing a hangover.

13. Not drinking is also an amazing way to wake up not broke. A nice dinner without alcohol is like having an invisible half-off coupon to the world's greatest restaurants. You will be shocked and delighted when the bill arrives, like every meal was secretly sponsored by Groupon.

14. When you're sober, you see with utter clarity which friends you feel comfortable around and which make you itch for an open bar. It's a fascinating litmus test, really.

15. Dating without alcohol is tricky, because it basically eliminates the easiest default activity in the entire dating manual: "Let's get a drink." But when you're sober, you notice that bars are often quite boring. Everyone's just sitting in one place, drinking.

16. When you're not drinking, it becomes obvious pretty quickly whether or not you have chemistry with someone. This was not true when I was drinking, because after two glasses of wine, I had chemistry with most men. And after a bottle, I had chemistry with the ceiling fan.

17. If your date drinks too much, it's almost impossible to find him hot. A guy slurring his words is like the universe waving a red flag: Do not go home with this man.

18. Back when I drank, it was the loud, extroverted men who drew all my attention. I was too blitzed to see the quiet guys in the corner who are comfortable in their own skin. They're worth trying to get to know. Alpha guys are exciting, but their egos can take up too much space in the room.

19. Dating sans alcohol forces you to answer the central question of romance: not, Does he like me? but, Do I like *him*? I see how rare it is to have a true connection with a guy who likes you and whom you like back, and I realize how important it is not to sabotage those connections.

20. Getting through the holidays sober can be a challenge. But you know what? On January 1, "quit drinking" no longer tops my resolutions list. And that's intoxicating.

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