

# Rave culture, reimaged: The rise of sober raves

As drinking declines among young people, sober raves are rising. Driven by **Gen Z**, these sober events are creating safer, substance-free spaces — challenging stigma and reshaping the future of partying.

by Buraera Ahsen

Image & photography credit: Ben Riley (DryWave)



People dancing with laser lights around

**S**ober raving is gaining rapid and meaningful momentum among Gen Z, who are choosing connection, the thrill of music, mental clarity and their health over booze, drugs and blackout nights.

“Raves were a thing in the 90s, and they were associated with drinking and drugs, but did drinking and drugs heighten the experience? We’re proving that it didn’t because our (sober) clubbing nights go absolutely off the energy.” says Ben Riley, founder and director of Manchester-based sober rave brand and community interest company DryWave. Traditionally, raves have been linked to alcohol and substance use. Even the Cambridge Dictionary defines them as “an event where young people dance to modern electric music and sometimes take illegal drugs.” But Gen Z is challenging that perception.

### The rise of the ‘Sober curious’ generation

Credit is due to the rise of the ‘sober curious generation’ – a term that describes Gen Z’s more mindful relationship with substances, popularised by Ruby Warrington’s 2018 book “Sober Curious.” The movement encourages intentional drinking choices rather than simply following default social norms.

### The data speaks

Research by Mintel, a global market research firm based in the UK, shows that British consumers aged 20-24 are almost half as likely to prioritise spending on alcoholic drinks for home than consumers aged over 75. Also, nearly two-thirds of consumers aged 18-24 say they worry about the emotional impact of alcohol. Practical factors matter too: around a quarter of Gen Z surveyors choose low- and no-alcohol drinks for the lower calorie content, and nearly a third cite the lower cost as a key reason. Google’s 2019 research adds depth: 41% of Gen Zers associate alcohol with “vulnerability”, “anxiety” and even “abuse.” Specifically, 60% of UK Gen Zers associate it with a loss of control, almost double those who do not. Naturally, with more young people steering away from alcohol, new, safe environments that facili-

tate and embrace sobriety, such as sober raves, are flourishing.

### The new age of raves

This cultural shift is being echoed by major DJs like Kaskade, ILLENIUM, DRiIIA, Chris Lake and Tom Bundt, who have now publicly embraced a sober lifestyle and actively support sober raving.

In a medium article, UK DJ Tom Bundt said his nightlife/festival experiences have improved since becoming sober: “The buzz just sticks with you so much more afterwards. Not only is the memory clearer, but the feeling of excitement and joy from an amazing night out sticks with you so much more vividly.”

Across the UK, Venues have been taking notice and responding. Venues and dedicated spaces like House of Happiness in London, a queer-led sober rave event, and DryWave, a prominent sober brand and a community interest company supported by the National Lottery and Arts Council, provide immersive yet drug- and alcohol-free environments. Another UK venture, Morning Gloryville, a sober morning raving experience, further illustrates the growing culture and demand for sober spaces.

*“There’s a major dip in alcohol sales and people getting wasted because young people don’t want to be out of control.”*

### Voices of the movement

Frinzess Jane (23), Midwife

Frinzess stopped drinking nearly 2 years ago.

“It was mostly after realising how it affected my weight, it felt like unnecessary calories. Since I was no longer a student, that lifestyle didn’t fit anymore.”

She says this decision has had an overall positive impact and it would be nice to see more sober spaces/events that allow people to enjoy themselves and the environment without worrying about drunken people or vomit. Her advice? “Think of the ‘longer-term effects. That often gets forgotten because people are too focused on ‘enjoying the moment!’”





Ben Riley, Founder + Director of DryWave

A producer, MC, and promoter, Ben Riley founded DryWave during his own sobriety journey. His sober brand and community interest company use music, creative tools, and ideas to engage hard-to-reach young people.

“People come to DryWave because they want a night off but still crave the clubbing experience - the loud music, amazing DJs, lights, lasers - they just don’t want to drink,” He explains. “There’s a major dip in alcohol sales and people getting wasted because young people don’t want to be out of control. That comes with the rise in social media. If you get too smashed, you’re on blast. Everybody sees it. Social media is educating people about the dangers of drinking and drugs and also helping break the stigma around sober raving.”

Jamie Hughes, sober raver & property developer

Jamie, 41, has been attending DryWave events since becoming sober and now sponsors one of their sober living spaces. He says in regards to taking drugs to heighten the night out/rave experience: “When you are under the influence, you create a fake version of yourself which tends to destroy the atmosphere around you.”

He encourages others to enjoy a sober night out: “Just do it, it’s always tough because under that pressure you think you are the only person but as soon as you go, you see the variety of personalities and backgrounds. Everyone’s welcome.”

#### **What recovery experts say about sober raving**

“Sober raves offer vital opportunities for people in recovery or those making lifestyle changes to socialise and have fun in safe environments,” says Miggy James from Nottingham Recovery Network, who leads the Inclusive Recovery Cities project in Nottingham.

“These alternatives also help with relapse prevention, especially since social events are often high-risk scenarios” But are more people becoming open to partying without substances?

“We can see that young people today are better informed than previous generations about the harms of alcohol and drugs. They are more proactive in making informed decisions, and the cost-of-living crisis, housing issues, and economic pressures have made them even less inclined to indulge.”

#### **What’s next?**

Even London’s most popular nightclub, Ministry of Sound is adapting.

From May 11th, it’s launching a series of daytime sober raves that will run quarterly until November to offer “a more inclusive club experience for the modern raver.”

In another instance, Cheryl Holland, now a sober Leeds musician, has recently launched a clubbing night that’s entirely alcohol-free and finishes before 10 pm in West Yorkshire.

Analysis by Mintel predicts that the trend away from drinking alcohol among young people will continue to grow. With Gen Z now making up one-third of the global population, the alcohol industry is adapting to young people’s new preferences.



So, as summer festival season approaches, the question remains:

Could we see sober sets at Glastonbury this year? Or is the scene still yet to align with the shifting preferences of its youngest crowd?