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LIGHTNING IN A BOTTLE

Can Heaps Normal strike gold again
with alcohol free wine?

INSIDE HEAPS NORMAL'S HIGH HOPES FOR ALCOHOL-FREE WINE

The brand's prosecco is its initial foray beyond beer.

By Tahlia Whitfield

Last week, Heaps Normal released High Hopes, its first product beyond beer. It's a \$23 non-alcoholic prosecco developed over 18 months with the Australian Wine Research Institute (AWRI).

It's a logical extension for a beer company that has spent plenty of time building an audience around alcohol-free drinking. Wine is the second-largest non-alcoholic category, offering Heaps Normal access to a new cohort of drinkers and, therefore, a substantial avenue for growth. High Hopes required failed batches and two-and-a-half tonnes of grapes, while the category itself continues to contend with the perception that alcohol abstinence must involve an uninspiring drink substitute. "Wine was maybe the obvious, but maybe not, because, as we discovered, it's really difficult to make a good non-alc wine," co-founder Ben Holdstock told *Inside Retail*.





Holdstock described the category's existing standard with the frankness of a brewer surveying an underwhelming tap list. "There are definitely a few really nice products, but the bar was kind of low as well for the whole category," he said.

Impressively balanced

Developed by Ned Brooks, Heaps Normal's head of wine, alongside Holdstock, the prosecco emerged after several months spent trialling different wine styles, aided by its user-friendly temperament and compatibility with alcohol-removal techniques. It also suits a social aspect Heaps Normal understands instinctively. "It is the start of the night. It's a celebration. It's a party drink," Holdstock said. Its potential as a base for low- and no-alcohol cocktails was another advantage, particularly for restaurant lists and at the company's Marrickville venue, Heaps Normal Health Club.

The prosecco is impressively balanced and refreshing, with green apple, pear and citrus carried by fine bubbles, a slightly creamy texture and pleasantly dry finish. "We deliberately developed a wine to be enjoyed with food – something versatile that can be enjoyed with anything from freshly shaved parma ham, mozzarella-filled arancini and pan-seared fish to – come summer – a dozen oysters and newspaper-wrapped fish and chips somewhere salty and warm," Brooks said.

The fruit came from the Hilltops region of New South Wales, while research and development took place with the Australian Wine Research Institute in Adelaide. One early trial required the team to move two-and-a-half tonnes of grapes from Young during a heatwave before fermentation began inside the van. "We left Young at three o'clock in the morning for Adelaide," Holdstock said. "It was pretty crazy." The fruit was also harvested according to the requirements of the eventual alcohol-free product, at a point that Holdstock concedes would be unconventional for traditional wine. Suffice to say, the destination governed every decision, from picking time to processing.

Unbeholden to tradition

Heaps Normal's outsider status within the wine market became an advantage. "We weren't beholden to any tradition here, so it gave us a lot of freedom to rethink how we do things," Holdstock said. The team stripped back its assumptions about wine in much the same way it had approached beer six years earlier, consulting winemakers, bartenders and organic chemists while developing an in-house production method. The result impressed collaborators at the AWRI's No-Low Wine Research Centre, which described it as among the best alcohol-free wines its team had encountered.

Distribution begins at the Health Club, selected independent retailers and restaurants, with the

Heaps Normal has spent more than five years persuading Australian drinkers that alcohol-free beer can belong in pubs, restaurants and Saturday afternoons. Wine offers a substantially larger audience and an even bigger market. Wine Australia has reported that low- and no-alcohol wine in Australia is expected to grow by an average of 6 per cent from 2023 to next year, reaching more than 1 million cases and an estimated 2 per cent of the wine market.

longer-term test resting on whether sommeliers, buyers and diners judge the product on flavour. However, Holdstock's preferred measure is uncomplicated: "People drink it and like it."

The launch extends beyond the bottle, as Heaps Normal has commissioned Sydney director Madeleine Purdy to create a music video for Meow Meow & the Smackouts' debut single, "Kicks", released through the brewery's in-house label, Heaps Normal Records, while an August launch party at the Health Club will include live music and a smash room where guests are invited to bring along an item they intend to destroy, albeit jovially.

"This is maybe the first step for us to actually getting recognised authentically, through the great product, as a drinks business, not just a beer business," Holdstock said. High Hopes functions, therefore, as both prosecco and prospectus – and a bid to prove Heaps Normal's expertise can travel far beyond the brewhouse.

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