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Conor Pope: What if dry January turned into dry forever? Eight ways life has changed since I stopped drinking in 2022

Conor Pope

11–14 minutes

If you had said three years ago that I would be writing the words you are reading right now, I would have reacted defensively or derisively or a cocktail of both.

You see, at the start of 2022, the adults in the [Pope](#) house decided to try dry January after a [festive season](#) that was pretty wet without being wildly excessive.

With young children making up a house majority, there were no Jägerbombs in Dicey Reilly's to welcome in the [new year](#) or late nights in pubs or [wine](#)-sodden dinners in restaurants or tequila slammers and bags of cans at house parties. There wasn't even a trip to the Stoneybatter local for pints.

However, there was plenty of wine and Champagne and the odd can of beer with a stupid name like "Huntsman's Dog Breath" bought because it looked and sounded exotic and cost more than €5 so had to be good.

It wasn't a bender of a season, then, but a steadily tipsy one and when the impact of it on our heads and our livers was totted up on New Year's Day 2022, we were in the mood for just a little break.

My wife suggested we join the herd partaking in Dry January and, loving a good bandwagon, I agreed without giving it too much thought. In truth, I was unconvinced we would see it through – 31 days seemed like a very long time.

Now, context is key here.

Like so many Irish people I would not have considered myself a big drinker and like so many Irish people I was lying to myself.

Looking at it in the rear-view mirror I can see now that my relationship with alcohol was problematic going all the way back to the 1980s when the parties started with ugly spirits filched from parents' drinks cabinets. Then there were flagons of cider to help us go dancing in the discos on the Salthill strip, the vomit-inducing Pernod and blacks and bottles of vodka with Russian-sounding names that were as cheap as they were disgusting.



Conor Pope in a previous life shopping for wine during a 'booze cruise' to France. Photograph: Bryan O'Brien

I was fortunate to escape my many youthful indiscretions without them causing me too much damage physically or emotionally and I am acutely aware there were many sliding door moments when drink could just as easily have left me scarred or dead as left me alive. It certainly did that to many friends of mine.

I drank myself sick more often than I care – or am able – to remember. But we were all young and stupid once and I wasn't much of an outlier within my peer group.

The outliers were the sober ones.

My 20s came with a different set of rules and responsibilities – and were marked by midnights at the Oasis and in the Warwick and the Castle and the GPO in [Galway](#) and then in the Kitchen and Rí-Rá and Renard's in [Dublin](#).

Drink was ever present and I was always there for it. I cycled home drunk too many times then too and – perhaps as dangerously – walked alone along dark and lonely streets, off my face and oblivious to any of the threats posed by a mean, drunken city. I was only beaten up once – outside a nightclub in Ranelagh when I was set upon by a group of men who kicked me repeatedly in the head as I lay on a rain-slicked pavement. I walked away that night but I might just as easily have been killed.

In my 30s, the wild nights out – largely – ended but wine at home took over.

I loved wine, mainly red wine and I drank loads of it. But, again, I didn't really consider my drinking wildly excessive and sure wasn't wine good for you. Civilised too. Very European.

Reading this might be infuriating if you are 11 days into dry January and struggling. I understand that. I was there too

In more recent years, with children to care for, my wife and I would share a bottle of wine a few times a week, with consumption spiking over birthday weeks, holidays and – obviously – Christmas.

But I was reassured that as I got older, my intake fell and there was no more reckless drunk cycling or wandering through city streets alone and vulnerable and I was probably consuming no more than 25 units a week, within touching distance of many health guidelines.

So, I was grand. Booze was my pal and when we started dry January in 2022 I said a casual “See ya later, buddy” rather than an emotionally charged “Goodbye forever”.

The first week or so was fine and having a second person on the wagon meant falling off it was less likely. Once the end of the month came closer, my competitive instinct took over and making it to January 31st became a thing of principle.



Conor and his wife Sonia enjoying mocktails recently.

Our wedding anniversary falls on February 1st which would have been the perfect time to pop some corks but as it happened, it was a rainy Tuesday so we decided to celebrate soberly. Valentine's Day that year was a Monday so there wasn't much by way of an incentive to bring our sober spell to an end on that day either.

That is when we agreed to keep it going for a second month. We were both feeling way better, exercising more, eating healthier food and generally being super-annoying about it to others.

But by March we would definitely be off the wagon with gusto: no more Matt Talbots in the Pope house.

Before that could happen we all got Covid, so that screwed up our plans for the St Patrick's Day weekend and another month passed us by.

And then a strange thing happened. Neither of us actually wanted to go back on the booze just yet so we said we would keep it going until the summer.

Then the end of June came and we were half a year in and suddenly determined to go a full year.

The year became two and now three. And life is all the better for all that.

Reading this might be infuriating if you are 11 days into dry January and struggling. I understand that. I was there too. So maybe I could share what I have learned about myself and the world around me since I stopped drinking by way of a short – very short – guide for the days ahead?

Eight lessons of a dry life



Pass on the cheeseboard. Photograph: iStock

1. Cheeseboards are a heartbreaking waste of space

First, and most importantly: as a sober person cheeseboards in fancy restaurants are a heartbreaking waste of space. Now I love cheese, I love it so, so much but a couple of years ago we went to Chapter One for my wife's birthday and had what was without exception the best meal I have ever had. But as the evening came to a close we were offered the cheeseboard so of course said yes. Here's the thing, it doesn't matter how good the cheese is, without red wine or port to wash it down it is just bread and cheese – a cheese sandwich if you will – immediately after a 14-course meal. Who needs that?

2. I'm not the weird one

Giving up booze is constantly framed as being hard or weird or suggestive of an illness. For those starting the journey, it is important to rewrite the narrative and tell a different story. The turning point for me was when I realised I was getting more out of the sober experience than I was missing from the drunk one. Hangovers and the horrors are hell. Clear-headed mornings are by contrast a delight and come with a side order of smugness.

Choosing not to drink is not weird but it is treated as such by so many people. I was one of them. We think it entirely normal to harp on about someone's choices of tipples on a night out when their choice of nibbles would never, ever be a conversational centrepiece. "Did you hear that Pope fella is not eating pasta tonight? I know, weird, right? He'll be no craic, that's for sure."

You are not the weird one. Those questioning your choices are the weird ones.

3. I'm saving money, but it's disappearing somewhere else

Giving up was never about the money for me but it's worth talking about anyway. Every now and then I calculate how much I've saved. If I allow us five bottles of €12 wine a week every week, the annual savings come in at €3,120. That's more than €10,000 in three years. I just wish I knew where those savings have gone, because they're not in my bank account.

[[A money-saving guide to make you richer \(or less poor\) in 2025](#) opens in new window]



Conor Pope pictured with a generous glass of non-alcoholic wine.

4. I can have fun at social affairs without the crutch

It is also important to manage your expectations of nights out. I won't lie, for a good while after I stopped drinking, social occasions were dull affairs, full of

people having more fun than me as they got pleasantly plastered and more chatty and then more repetitive. Often I'd go home early out of boredom. Eventually I just had to lean into it and decide to have fun without the crutch. A key moment came at family wedding earlier this year when, without so much as a drop taken, myself and my wife took to the stage in front of 200 people and sang a – if I say so myself – stunning karaoke version of Love Story by [Taylor Swift](#). The old me would never have done that sober. I am not sure the audience were as appreciative as they should have been but I was delighted.

5. Seeing wine abroad makes me sad, but not too sad

I thought holidays would be a big problem because of all the free time and the fact that the destinations I visit sell big beefy Riojas and gentle fruity vino verde's for less than €5. To be honest even now when I'm in a supermarket overseas and I see the endless array of gorgeous wines for buttons it makes me sad, but not so sad that I break.



Conor Pope and his dogs.

6. You can never have enough non-alcoholic wine

Non-alcoholic beers and wines are getting better and better. Alcohol-free beers in particular are almost indistinguishable from the alcoholic alternatives. When it

comes to wine, it is [trickier](#). The whites and the sparkling options are the best but you will have to spend more than €15 to get a decent one and even then it is not really like the real thing. Red wines are terrible; I have no idea of the science behind it but for some reason they are all bad.

When you go to a dinner party as a non-drinker you have to actually bring your non-alcoholic wine for you and alcoholic wine for your hosts. Not only that you have to bring at least three bottles of the non-alcoholic wine because everybody in the room is going to want to taste it and you'd want to be a real cheapskate to say no.

[[Two alcohol-free beers for the dry January wagon](#)Opens in new window]

7. My organs are thanking me

For reasons that I don't need to go to here I've been interested in the movement of my heart for many years and keen to keep it going. I've had a monitor for ages so can definitively state my blood pressure has fallen by a good 10-15 points without alcohol. And then there is the liver – a remarkable organ that doesn't hold a grudge, at least according to my most recent medical, which suggested mine might just as easily have been found in the innards of a teetotal monk. Bless its powers of regeneration.

[[Doctors share 19 tips for looking after your liver: Don't drink alcohol every day, but do drink coffee, and lose weight](#)Opens in new window]

8. I'm lighter, in spirit and body

Just like I didn't think about saving pounds when I stopped, I didn't think about losing them when either. But it happened anyway. Over the course of the first year I easily lost 10kg, maybe even 12kg. Now, I did put some of them back on subsequently but I am still lighter than I was, in spirit and in body.

It did not cross my mind even for a second that dry January would turn into dry forever and if it had I don't think I would have agreed. But it did and it is one of the best things that could have happened to me and my life is immeasurably better in almost every conceivable way – as a result of that decision taken on a whim. If you're doing dry January now, fair play to you. And if you're not, that's fine too. There's always next year.

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