Twitter Thread by John deBary



John deBary
@jnd3001

I didn't drink alcohol for 2020 and now I want to talk about it in a long twitter thread that should probably just be a blog post, but here goes:

(I get into topics like alcohol abuse, mental illness, homphobia, and parental death, just fyi)

Some background first: every year I do some kind of restriction. Last year I only re-read books, another year I didn't buy any clothes. My dad is catholic and even though I hate the religion, something about the 'fasting' elements of lent and advent stuck with me.

I enjoy cutting myself off from things to create space in unexpected places. It's where Innovation and creativity flourish. I did some of my best work for Momofuku Nishi, and @davidchang told me I had to create an Italian cocktail program, but nothing could come from Italy.

My family also loved wine and used connoisseurship to cast consumption in a virtuous light. Opening that 4th bottle of Chateauneuf-de-Pape was *educational*

My mom once yelled at a wine steward for not letting my then-17-year-old brother have a glass of wine with our dinner.

Wine is great though! Beer, spirits, etc. They're all fascinating things to study on many levels. (Hello I wrote a whole cocktail book)

Plus, they're fun to drink and usually taste delicious and accompanied most major rituals in my life: birthday, Christmas, weddings, funerals…

in 2008 I started at a fancy cocktail bar, and then a cool restaurant group. Neither of these places had hard partying cultures based on what I've seen. Sure we have shift drinks, regularly taste wines, but nothing out of control or unprofessional (again, from what I experienced)

This is to say though, that working as a bartender acclimatizes you to a different level of alcohol consumption. Three Daiquiris doesn't seem like a lot, when in reality it's a 1/3 of a bottle of rum.

But even then, alcohol wasn't huge issue for me, I loved going out and drinking excessively, but I also loved going to bed at 9pm and exercising the next morning.

My drinking patterns started to change in 2013 when my mom was diagnosed with glioblastoma—a gruesomely incurable brain cancer that kills most people within 18 months. We treated it aggressively, though, surgery, radiation, chemo—up until my wedding.

She wanted to be as normal as present as she could for that. She stopped treatment after the wedding and died six months later.

She deteriorated rapidly. I spent most weekends after that at my parents' and alcohol was a huge part of that experience. We weren't even trying to gussy it up with wine arcana—we had three bottles of vodka in the freezer.

(Looking back, grief counseling for the family and individual therapy may have been a bit better use of our time than drinking to oblivion, but alas.)

This was the time I started to notice myself no longer being hungover in the morning after drinking, but simply still drunk. It almost felt like I had cheated the system: "You can't be hungover if you're still drunk!" but….

Searing anxiety would creep in as the day wore on. And it was countdown until I could drink again, or just power through the shattered psyche until I got back to normal.

But for the most part I was "fine" drinking heavily on weekends and being normal and productive during the week, but still working in an environment where alcohol was never not present.

A big turning point was the 2016 election. My mom bears an uncanny resemblance to HRC and was a proxy for her. I canvassed and campaigned, in part to support an extremely qualified candidate against an autocratic monster, but also as a way to keep my mother alive—to save her.

And we all know how that election turned out. I ended up frozen—literally—in my bed for weeks after the results were called. The times I could move, I would reach into a drawer under my bed and take a swig of whatever cognac or rye I had stashed there the night before.

It got to the point where I had to type out texts to my husband in order to communicate basic needs.

Needless to say this was not an awesome experience for him, but we found a psychiatrist, and I started going. It took about two years, but we found the right combination of diagnoses (anxiety, insomnia, and OCD) and medication.

As I was recovering from this "episode" I would experience stretches of amazing health, complete avoidance of alcohol, strenuous exercise for 7 hours per week, kale salads, kombucha, the works

But. Every 3-4 months would slip into what my husband and I lovingly ("lovingly") call a "J-Hole". My anxiety would build to a point where I would just break.

They felt like a manic episodes, everything would become bright and possible, and I would do impulsive things like chug a half a bottle of gin on a Tuesday afternoon or buy 500 ladybugs online

Then I would crash and be out of commission for a few days.

The last J-Hole was almost two years ago. They cleared up after I sought cognitive behavioral therapy for insomnia (I cannot recommend this enough), and also when I finally got on the right amount of medication for my body size.

My internalized ableism shamed me into thinking “less” was better, even if it meant I was not fixing the issue the medication was supposed to fix so it took me YEARS to finally get up to the right dosage so that my anxiety disorder and OCD was actually managed effectively.

Once these J-hole episodes cleared up, it was so easy to see how much of a destabilizing force alcohol was for me, especially during such the excruciating experience of watching your mom’s brain rot from the inside, and seeing your country slide into fascism and autocracy.

(I never experienced homophobic street harassment until after the 2016 election, just FYI. IN Summer 2017 my husband was attacked on the subway for touching someone with his "f-gg-t purse"

I read a bunch of books to prepare for this year. One of the best was This Naked Mind. (@ThisNakedMind It’s a quick read and I highly recommend you checking it out, even if you have no desire to change your drinking. Podcasts are great too. https://t.co/dIjgwdSC98

I chose to do a dry 2020 before the pandemic hit and my industry crumbled around me, but I don’t think I could have picked a better year to cut out something that had the potential to be so dangerous. (Like, if you’re on dirt road, maybe skip the rollerblades and walk instead.)

This year has been huge for me. The foundation that I started in 2018, Restaurant Workers’ Community Foundation (@rwcfusa), rasied over $7.5M for covid relief; I published my first cocktail book in June, and I launched my non-alcoholic drink brand in July.

I can only imagine how much more difficult this would have been if I had even been drinking a few nights per month. I don't think I would have been able to pull this off.

Alcohol has been humanity’s companion since pre-history. Yes it is harmful, but so are a lot of things we enjoy. We can’t try to live a risk-free life. It’s about the choices you make and the risks you accept.

Taking an entire year off alcohol taught me that I could walk away from it if I needed to, but that there were times when drinking is nice, but not obligatory.

Are the sloppily-batched cocktails at that event going to make it any less awkward? Is cracking open a bottle of wine on a Friday night to watch tv worth it if it means I'm dragging the next day? Maybe! but also maybe not. Taking the year off has given me that perspective.

It's new year's eve eve and I'm wondering what to take from this year. I don't think I'm going to become a forever teetotaler, but I'm also not counting the seconds until the clock strikes midnight so that I can get wasted again. Maybe I'll cap it off with a Dry January? (lol)

Oh, and my thing for 2021?

I'm going vegan.■

also, I've been thinking about this piece a lot this week https://t.co/uBLwRYePgd