

Lifestyle | Features



This picture shows a bartender making a cocktail in a non-alcoholic bar in Tokyo. — AFP photos



A bartender making a cocktail in a non-alcoholic bar in Tokyo.



A non-alcoholic drink placed on a table as Rei Azezaki, 21, visits a bar in Tokyo.



A bartender (right) making a cocktail in a non-alcoholic bar in Tokyo.

TEETOTALLERS EMERGE FROM THE SHADOWS IN HARD-DRINKING JAPAN

At a trendy Tokyo cocktail bar, customers sip brightly coloured beverages with sophisticated flavor profiles, designed for a small but growing market in hard-drinking Japan: teetotalers. At "0%", all the cocktails are non-alcoholic, but the bar is still something of an anomaly in Japan, where drinking is popular and considered an important part of business culture. With alcohol as a lubricant, the formality that can govern the Japanese workplace slips away, and drinking-often heavily-with colleagues is seen as important to career advancement for some.

There's even a word for drinking with colleagues: "nominication", a portmanteau of the word for drink-nomi-in Japanese and the English word communication. That has long put non-drinkers like Hideto Fujino, a 54-year-old fund manager, at a disadvantage, but he and others like him are speaking out-and finding they are not alone. "There are many times that non-drinkers feel uncomfortable," he told AFP. "You sometimes hear statements like 'you can't get promoted if you can't drink alcohol'," said Fujino, who started a Facebook group for non-drinkers. Fujino doesn't drink because he cannot process alcohol well-like about five percent of Japanese, and many other east Asians, he lacks some of the enzymes that break down the toxic byproducts of alcohol.

Those with the genetic disposition suffer various side effects including flushed cheeks and feeling sick when they drink. But there are plenty of other reasons that people don't drink, said Fujino, whose Facebook group attracted

over 4,000 members within months of him creating it. Some cite health reasons, or pregnancy, while others dislike alcohol or its effects on them, and some like drinking but have decided to cut back-a group that is growing in other parts of the world and is sometimes termed "sober curious".

'Lonely and discriminated against'

For centuries, alcohol has played an important social role in Japan-feudal lords used it to bond with subordinates and sake was brewed in some temples. More recently, it has been seen as a way for co-workers to speak more freely than is sometimes possible in often deeply hierarchical workplaces. This means that non-drinkers can struggle, said Fujino, with many feeling their career progression may in part depend on drinking. "In the office, sometimes senior staff only take out those who can drink," he said. "You're told 'we didn't ask you to come because you can't drink'-this makes you feel lonely and discriminated against."

Fujino coined the term "gekonomist" for people like him-combining the word for people allergic to alcohol "geko" with "nomi" and the English suffix "ist". On his Facebook group, fellow gekonomists swap recipes for non-alcoholic drinks they enjoy and share stories about their experiences. "Today, I tasted this," one member commented with a photo of a glass of a drink resembling whisky. "Of course, it's non-alcoholic, with the scent of a cypress tree!"

The group also exploded with comments on the election of Japan's new Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga, a rare

high-profile teetotaler. "Congratulations on the birth of a geko prime minister!" one user wrote, while another speculated about the pressure Suga must have faced to join drinking parties while rising up the ranks. "Overcoming this to become a prime minister is impressive."

tails infused with ingredients including basil, mascarpone cheese, seaweed, and berries.

Among the customers one Saturday evening was Rei Azezaki, 21, who is allergic to alcohol and had brought along her boyfriend, who is a drinker.

their 30s drank the equivalent of two or more glasses of wine, at least three days a week-half the number in both age groups from a decade earlier. Naoko Kuga, a senior researcher at NLI Research Institute, has studied the changing alcohol market in Japan and



Customers Rei Azezaki, 21, (left) and Yuto Takahashi, 24, (right) drinking in a non-alcoholic bar in Tokyo.



Drop in young drinkers

Mayumi Yamamoto, who started 0%, said she was inspired to offer better non-alcoholic drinks by her own experience as a teetotaler. "I thought it would be great if there were drink menu options other than tea and carbonated water for people like me who can't drink much alcohol," the 31-year-old told AFP. The bar in the popular nightlife area of Roppongi, famous for clubs and drinking holes, offers vegan food alongside cock-

"Usually I drink a lot of alcohol," said Yuto Takahashi, 24. "But here I enjoy drinks more slowly, it's like I'm appreciating the atmosphere more. I like it very much." Similar booze-free bars are cropping up elsewhere in Japan, with their locations enthusiastically shared on Fujino's Facebook group, and health ministry data suggests heavy drinking is falling among young people.

In 2017, just 16 percent of men in their 20s and 25 percent of those in

says young people increasingly have a different relationship with alcohol, particularly around colleagues. "Young people don't want that old 'nominication' with superiors that lasts hours," she told AFP. "They'll choose what they want as the first glass, and it might well be non-alcoholic." — AFP

BON JOVI ALBUM '2020' ASKS 'QUESTIONS' ABOUT PANDEMIC,

Jon Bon Jovi hits the hot-button social issues of America in "2020", his 15th studio album - the coronavirus pandemic, race relations, and police violence - but he says he's asking questions, not taking sides. "I say it's topical instead of political... that I don't take sides," he told Reuters TV. But he added: "I tried to consider myself a witness to history. And if I was just witnessing history, I could write down the facts and maybe I could pose a question. But that's where I wanted to leave it." The rock group Bon Jovi, inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 2018, was formed in 1983 and remains one of the biggest acts in the US music industry.



The band recorded the album in March of 2019 in Nashville, with plans to release it in May 2020. But it was postponed to Oct 2 and two new songs were added, "Do What You Can," which features a masked Bon Jovi celebrating workers on the frontline of the pandemic, and "American Reckoning," about the death of George Floyd, a Black man, under the knee of a Minneapolis policeman. The song "Brothers in Arms" nods to former NFL quarterback Colin Kaepernick, who sparked a national debate when he protested against racial injustice by kneeling as the US national anthem played before games.

Asked if he was concerned about backlash from singing about issues that have divided Americans, especially ahead of the Nov 3 election, Bon Jovi said he was "aware" but not afraid. "I've definitely opened myself up to criticism," he said. "But there are moments in my day, to be honest with you, that I sit around and I think I'm afraid of what the reaction to the record is going to be and what are people going to think of me." — Reuters

America's Black farmers work to uproot racism

In the sweltering heat of a greenhouse, Brooke Bridges inspects long rows of tomato plants, pleased to see a bountiful harvest growing. Once ripe, the crop will be picked and packed, then delivered mainly to poor Black and minority families around Albany, the capital of New York state. "A beautiful box of produce can spark something in them and remind them of who they are as a Black person in America," said the 29-year-old Bridges, who gave up an acting career in California to move to the New York countryside. This young Black woman is one of seven employees working for Soul Fire Farm, which calls itself a "BIPOC-centered community farm"-the acronym standing for Black, Indigenous and People of Color.

The 80-acre (32-hectare) farm was founded in 2011 by an African-American activist, Leah Penniman, and her husband Jonah Vitale-Wolff. It specializes in medicinal herbs, such as mint, bee balm, St John's wort and calendula, and vegetables, with the goal of helping fight racial injustice. That cause gained urgency and became a focus of the presidential election campaign after nationwide protests that followed the death in May of the African-American George Floyd, who was asphyxiated under the knee of a white police officer.

An economic 'knee'

While the Black Lives Matter movement has drawn attention to police vio-



Brooke Bridges, who works at the Black-owned Soul Fire Farm near Albany, New York, inspects an abundant crop of tomatoes. — AFP photos

lence and racism in American cities, racial injustice in the farming sector remains less well-known. Blacks are clearly under-represented on US farms. There are only 45,000 Black farmers — 1.3 percent of all agricultural producers. Black people are about 13 percent of the population, according to census data. And yet, a century ago nearly 15 percent of American farmers were black, reflecting reforms that followed the end of slavery in the 1860s. But during the 20th century, racial segregation, discriminatory Jim Crow laws and the many obstacles to farm ownership forced many Black people to leave the rural South in search of work-often in factories-in the North.

One of the most common discriminato-

ry practices was that of "redlining"-refusing credit to poor people, many of them Black, living in certain defined areas. It remains difficult even today for African-Americans in many parts of the country to obtain the bank loans they need to buy and develop a farm. "We all realize that while we don't have a physical knee on our neck, Black farmers have had an economic knee on their neck since the end of slavery," said Dewayne Goldman, executive director of the National Black Growers Council, a group advocating for black farmers. "What makes it worse in rural America, and certainly in the farming community, is that that knee that was on the neck of my grandfather still impacts me today," said Goldman, who runs a family farm in Arkansas.

Ancestral techniques

Adding to the economic inequities are persistent prejudices. Justin Butts, who is in charge of sheep, pigs and fowl at Soul Fire Farm, faced the skepticism of white colleagues in Pennsylvania when he took up farming. "Other farmers didn't believe that I was a farmer and was legitimate," said Butts, a former naval officer. "Or they would tell me that Black people don't farm-when I was a young person just beginning the farm. And it was very insulting." The issue has drawn little political attention, though Democratic presidential candidate Joe Biden has promised to support the rights of indigenous farmers and those of color.

As they work to build a healthier relationship to the earth, the members of Soul Fire Farm have embraced farming traditions used by their ancestors-techniques like no-till farming, intercropping and mulching. The farm also holds training seminars and history talks that draw thousands of budding farmers each year. "It's not something that we've gotten to experience in centuries because of how our ancestors were brought here, how they were stripped of their land," said Brooke Bridges. "It was extremely traumatic, but our ancestors made it. Their Black lives really mattered." — AFP



Justin Butts, livestock manager at Soul Fire Farm, checks on the animals in his charge.



African-American farmers like those who operate the Soul Fire Farm account for only 1.3 percent of the rural US population.