Raising the Bar: A Practical Playbook for Restaurant Drink Sales

By Carol Wight with help from Perplexty & Canva

Why Alcohol Sales Are Down

Alcohol has long been a profit engine for restaurants, but operators across New Mexico and the U.S. are seeing meaningful declines in on-premise drink sales. Several forces are converging:

- More guests are choosing not to drink at all, especially younger adults, as national polling shows the share of U.S. adults who consume alcohol has fallen to a record low.
- Guests who do drink are often limiting themselves to one drink, trading frequency for "better" products and experiences, a continuation of the "drink less but better" trend.
- Economic pressure and inflation make premium cocktails and wines feel like luxuries that can be skipped, especially when restaurant checks are already higher due to food and labor.
- Off-premise options (RTDs, grocery, big-box retail) have become highly convenient and relatively affordable, and many guests now "pre-game" at home and order only food when they dine out.
- In New Mexico specifically, lingering post-pandemic shifts in dining patterns, staffing challenges, and cautious consumer behavior have kept many operators below 2019 sales levels.

For New Mexico operators, these trends show up as:

- Fewer alcohol units per cover.
- Lower check averages on tables that used to order a bottle or a round.
- A mix shift toward water, soda, and nonalcoholic options.

This guide is designed to help you respond strategically—with responsible, guest-focused tactics that protect public safety and support your bottom line.

Principles of Responsible Alcohol Sales Growth

Strategy

Before jumping into tactics, it's important to frame your alcohol sales strategy around responsibility and your long-term brand.

Key principles:
Lead with guest experience, not "pushing drinks." Focus on making it easy and appealing to enjoy a well-made beverage, alcoholic or non-alcoholic.

Embrace moderation trends. Offer low-ABV and zero-proof options so every guest feels included, and no one feels pressured.

Train

Train staff to sell, but not oversell. Teach suggestive selling, menu storytelling, and pairing—alongside strict adherence to ID checks, overservice rules, and safe-service policies.

Protect your license and community. New Mexico's overservice and dram-shop rules are designed to prevent harm; violations are costly in every sense. Thoughtful sales strategies work within those guardrails.

Measure

Measure what matters. Track alcohol mix (by category), attach rates (e.g., % of checks with at least one alcoholic beverage), and contribution margin per guest so you know which tactics work.

If your goal is "more profitable, responsible beverage programs," you can grow alcohol revenue while staying firmly aligned with your mission and legal obligations.

What Good Operators Can Do

BELOW ARE PRACTICAL STEPS RESTAURANTS CAN TAKE RIGHT NOW.

Elevate and simplify the beverage menu

- Curate a tight list of high-margin, high-appeal cocktails, wines, and beers instead of long, confusing menus.
- Highlight 3–5 "house specialties" with names, flavor descriptions, and pricing that make the choice easy.
- Use clear callouts: boxes, icons, or sidebars for "Featured Cocktail," "Staff Favorite," or "Seasonal Spritz."

Train servers and bartenders for confident, responsible selling

- Script one or two natural opening lines, like "Can I tell you about our house margarita or our zero-proof hibiscus spritz?"
- Teach pairing suggestions: "This chile-forward dish goes beautifully with a crisp lager or a citrusy Paloma."
- Reinforce the right to refuse service and how to handle it gracefully; safe service comes first.

Create a serious zero-proof and low-ABV section

- Offer sophisticated spirit-free cocktails using house syrups, fresh juices, and garnishes so non-drinkers don't default to water.
- Include at least one low-ABV option (spritz, wine-based cocktail, shandy) for guests who want "just a little" alcohol.
- Price zero-proof drinks fairly; they should feel like a treat, not an afterthought.

STEPS TO INCREASE YOUR ALCOHOL SALES

Pricing

Optimize pricing and portioning

- Review your pour cost and consider slightly smaller, more affordable options (e.g., 5 oz wines, 8 oz cocktails) that feel like less of a splurge.
- Offer good-better-best price tiers within key categories so guests can trade up when they're able.
- Use bundles: "Burger + local beer" or "Flatbread + house sangria" for value-driven guests.
- Leverage promotions and partnerships (within legal constraints)
- Run themed nights (e.g., "Local Spirits Flight Night") that focus on education and experience, not heavy consumption.
- Partner with local distilleries, breweries, and wineries for collaborative cocktails, flights, and tasting events.
- Promote mocktail and driver-friendly options alongside any alcohol messaging to reinforce your commitment to safe service.

Create a Monthly Cocktail Calendar

Calendar of Cocktails

12-Month Specialty Cocktail Ideas

Use this sample calendar as a jumping-off point for a rotating feature program. Always check New Mexico law on pricing, promotions, and advertising before launching offers.

January – "New Year, New Sips"
- Focus: low-ABV and zero-proof.
- Feature: Citrus & Herb Spritz (optional splash of sparkling wine).

February – "Local Love Libations"
- Focus: Valentine's, local spirits.
- Feature: Red chile chocolate old fashioned with New Mexico bourbon.

March – "Spring Citrus & Spice"
- Focus: fresh citrus, lighter flavors.
- Feature: Blood orange margarita with a tajín rim.

April – "Garden Gimlets"
- Focus: herbs and botanicals.
- Feature: Cucumber-mint gimlet (and a zero-proof version with seed-based spirit).

May – "Patio Palomas"
- Focus: patio drinking, tequila/grapefruit.
- Feature: Smoked salt Paloma with mezcal option.

June – "Summer Sangria Month"
- Focus: batches and pitchers for groups.
- Feature: Rosé-berry sangria by the glass and carafe.

July – "Chill & Grill"
- Focus: frozen and slushie-style beverages.
- Feature: Frozen watermelon margarita; zero-proof frozen limeade with fresh fruit.

August – "Spice & Stone Fruit"
- Focus: peak stone fruits.
- Feature: Green chile–peach mule with local vodka.

September – "Harvest Highballs"
- Focus: apples, pears, early fall flavors.
- Feature: Apple-ginger highball with whiskey or apple cider base.

October – "Smoke & Spice"
- Focus: cozy, smoky cocktails.
- Feature: Smoked maple mezcal sour.

November – "Holiday Warm-Ups"
- Focus: warm, mulled flavors.
- Feature: Mulled wine or spiced cider (with and without spirits).

December – "Bubbles & Bright Lights"
- Focus: sparkling and celebratory.
- Feature: Pomegranate rosemary French 75 and a sparkling nonalcoholic punch.

Operational tips:
- Rotate one or two features each month and train staff on ingredients, story, and suggested pairings.
- Promote via table tents, QR codes, social media, and email lists.
- Track sales and guest feedback to refine next year's calendar.

CONCLUSION

Turning Insight into Action

To turn this guide into results, a strong operator can:

Audit the current state

- Pull 6–12 months of data: % of sales from alcohol, top-selling drinks, and attach rate per check.
- Ask: Where are we losing sales opportunities - at lunch, late night, family groups, younger guests?

Set specific, realistic goals

- Examples: "Increase checks with at least one alcoholic beverage from 28% to 35% in six months," or "Grow zero-proof cocktail sales to 5% of beverage mix."
- Align goals with responsibility—no quota that encourages overservice.

Implement a simple quarterly plan

- Q1: Tighten menu, add 2 great mocktails, start monthly feature.
- Q2: Staff training on suggestive selling and pairings; launch local partner event.
- Q3: Refresh calendar, adjust pricing, add flight program.
- Q4: Focus on holiday experiences and group packages.

Communicate and celebrate

- Share goals and progress with your team regularly, and celebrate wins like higher attach rates or positive guest comments.
- Reinforce that success is measured in guest satisfaction, safety, and profitability, not just volume.

By understanding why alcohol sales are softening and responding with thoughtful, guest-centric programming, New Mexico restaurants can protect a key profit center, differentiate their brands, and serve their communities responsibly.

HERE'S TO YOU!

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