

A pina colada at the touch of a button: the 'Vocktail' (or virtual reality cocktail) put to the test



Trying a Vocktail, available until Saturday at London's Future Tech Now fair CREDIT: RII SCHROER

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I've always been terrified of virtual reality. When Armageddon comes, I'm convinced it'll be wrought by a sinister army of robots rather than some over-excitably world leader whose finger wanders too close to the big red button.

Increasingly, we're handing over all manner of routine activities to technology. At supermarkets, human contact is dying out; soon we'll be able to travel the world from the sofa; even [driving may one day be an anachronism](https://www.telegraph.co.uk/business/2018/04/01/googles-waymo-denies-masterplan-harvest-data-driverless-cars/)

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Food and drink, I hoped, would be the last bastion against the virtual reality takeover. As of yet, I'm not aware of a successful recreation of Willy Wonka's Three Course Dinner Chewing Gum; most people still sit down to a meal, even if their [fridges and hobs are smart](https://www.telegraph.co.uk/politics/2018/03/07/government-calls-tougher-security-smart-devices-stop-criminals/) (<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/politics/2018/03/07/government-calls-tougher-security-smart-devices-stop-criminals/>) and [Alexa](https://www.telegraph.co.uk/technology/2017/12/19/amazon-echo-show-review-alexa-better-screen/) (<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/technology/2017/12/19/amazon-echo-show-review-alexa-better-screen/>) provides the evening's entertainment.

Then I heard of a new device claiming to offer any cocktail at the touch of a button, and I knew I had to try it - it's always best to know your enemy. The 'Vocktail' (virtual reality cocktail) arrived in London today for a three-day stint at the Future Tech Now exhibition at the Business Design Centre in North London. Wandering through the fair was like being shown visions of a dystopian future - but a bar is a bar, even if it's a VR bar.



Are virtual reality cocktails the future? CREDIT: RII SCHROEDER

The concept was dreamed up by Dr Nimesha Ranasinghe at the National University of Singapore in 2012. Since then, his team have been perfecting the device. The Vocktail plays on the user's sense of smell, sight and taste, pumping scents straight to your nose from air pumps on the 3D-printed base, with lights also changing your perception.

On the martini glass rim, electrode strips send electric pulses to stimulate the taste buds. You can play around with the app that controls the device to change the sourness or sweetness of a drink, for example.

David Tolley, the team's app development man, was on hand to show me the ropes. I start off with a simple glass of still water. Except, it doesn't taste like it. On the app, I select the creatively named "peach drink", and a huge yellow light emerges. "The light influences your perception," Tolley tells me. It smells beautiful, but still tastes of water. The trick, however, is to get your tongue to make contact with the electrode strips. As if by magic, the water suddenly tastes of peaches.

Then we move onto the hard stuff. Except, it's not, as there's no ingestion of alcohol involved. The VR-tenders pour in some simple soda water, and I get several Vocktails out of it. The Senorita smells just like tequila - flavour-wise, it's almost there. The Gypsy - tequila and cinnamon - is nice. But the Poison Ivy, which mimics cognac and coriander leaf, is superb.

Members of the team developing the Vocktail at the National University of Singapore CREDIT: RII SCHROER

But why bother with VR, I ask, when you can just have the real thing? It turns out there are plenty of potential benefits. If you find yourself reading a book-length drinks menu wondering what the hell a ridiculously named cocktail tastes like, a quick sample of its Vocktail version could help you decide.

If you're looking to lose weight, you can drink plain water but still get a flavour hit. For teetotalers, it could make a night out more fun. It could even be used to make a refreshing and cheap glass of Coca-Cola once that [sugar tax](https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2018/04/04/sugar-taxes-improve-health-poor-major-study-finds/) (<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2018/04/04/sugar-taxes-improve-health-poor-major-study-finds/>) kicks in.

The product is still very much in its early stages, and it's not yet commercially available, though the team are seeking partners to help them expand. I was dubious of the Vocktail's ability to trick me beforehand, and I'm still sceptical of VR. Does it beat a good old-fashioned drink? Of course not, as getting a little tipsy is part of the fun, but, for its ability to change flavour so drastically and trick you into thinking you're drinking a cocktail, I'm more than impressed.

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