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## FOOD & DRINK

# With Ice, Size Matters

*From shards to spheres, using the right shape can turn great drinks into extraordinary ones*

By KIMBERLY CHOU

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Trying to up your cocktail game? If you're no longer looking for a new rum Agricole or some artisanal bitters to set your shelves apart, maybe it's time to turn an eye to your freezer. The difference between a good drink and a great drink isn't just about the booze—it's about the ice.



**FREEZE FRAME:** Perfect cubes are ideal for a highball glass. *F. Martin Ramin for The Wall Street Journal, Food Styling by Brett Kurzweil*

The recent resurgence of classic cocktails has spawned a concurrent trend of ice appreciation. High-end cocktail bars are shaking, stirring and serving their \$18 drinks with dense, extra-large cubes, hand-cut shards and spheres. And there's no reason your at-home ice should lag behind.

"Quality ice has become standard equipment for any respectable cocktail bar," said Charles Joly, head bartender at the Drawing Room in Chicago. "Ice and what it produces in a cocktail—temperature and dilution—are really important factors that are never listed in a recipe."

When it comes to ice, size does matter, not to mention shape, density and clarity. If you prefer your Scotch on the rocks, beware: Small, brittle ice will quickly dilute years of cask aging. No one wants a Bruichladdich slushie.

But large cubes or spheres of ice will melt more slowly, bringing your drink closer to the temperature of the ice without over-diluting it. Larger pieces, such as spears the length of a glass, are ideal for

keeping tall, carbonated beverages chilled. And there's a place for pebbled and crushed ice, too: mint juleps, swizzles and many tiki drinks wouldn't be possible without them.

Where do these ice shapes come from? The Kold-Draft ice machine—which freezes clear, 1¼-

inch square cubes by pumping water up into a refrigerated copper tray called an evaporator—has become the industry standard. The circulating water essentially freezes from the top and sides as it hits the tray, with heavy impurities flushed out through holes at the bottom. Bartenders at Weather Up in New York carve from 300-pound blocks harvested from an in-house Clinebell ice-maker. Boston's Drink and Philadelphia's Franklin Mortgage also use large blocks that more often serve ice sculptors. And many bars, including Chicago's Sable and New York's PDT, use a Japanese metal press to produce spherical ice.

For the home bartender, start with distilled water and a cleaned-out freezer so the ice doesn't absorb stray aromas. For super-clear ice, some people advocate boiling the water, letting it come to room temperature, then boiling it again before freezing. You can also cover the not-yet-frozen trays with plastic wrap to further protect ice from absorbing outside smells. But if you don't want to go through these steps, use filtered water rather than ordinary tap. Once they freeze, throw your cubes (or whatever shape they may be) into Ziploc bags.

"Ice acts like your liquid oven, stove or essentially, cold 'cooking' device where, through a change in temperature and dilution, individual spirits and modifying elements are melded into a delicious whole," said Ryan Magarian of the Portland, Ore., drinks consulting firm Liquid Relations. "Simply put, the better the ice, the better the drinks."

For the industrious, here's how to do it at home, from cubes to crushed, spheres to spears.



ICE GUIDE: From left: spears; crushed ice; perfect cubes; spheres; big block. *F. Martin Ramin for The Wall Street Journal, Styling by Brett Kurzweil*

### **Spears**

Big columns of ice are ideal for keeping drinks cold after they have already been stirred or shaken and are at their ideal level of dilution. The spear is an aesthetically pleasing option if you want a single piece of ice, in lieu of a stack of cubes, in a tall glass.

**How to make them:** Break out the scissors. Mr. Joly suggest modifying an existing ice-cube mold, like the easy-to-cut silicone Tovolo Perfect Cube trays (\$13 for two, [tovo.com](http://tovo.com)). Measure the glass you're using against the tray and cut out the ribs to create one long spear.

### **Crushed ice**

Finely crushed ice is great for creating frosty tiki drinks, swizzles and smashes—and creates a pretty drink when packed high in a julep cup or double Old-Fashioned glass.

**How to make them:** Get what's known as a Lewis bag, a canvas sack that you pack with ice and then hit with an accompanying wooden mallet or muddler (\$20 for bag, muddler and shaker, [after5catalog.com](http://after5catalog.com)). The canvas should wick away some of the wetness, producing a drier ice. Don't get too aggressive—crush to the point where you still have some irregular chunks, like the size of rock sugar, but not Sno Cone-fine.

### ***Perfect Cubes***

This shape is the backbone of a great cocktail—stir or shake with these. Drop one or two large cubes in a rocks glass or double Old-Fashioned glass if you're sipping a spirit like whiskey or drinking something like an Old Fashioned or a Negroni. Stack a few in a highball glass or slighter narrower Collins glass for long drinks.

**How to make them:** Buy a set of Tovolo King Cube Extra Large Silicone Ice Cube Trays, which make two-inch cubes (\$9, [tovolo.com](http://tovolo.com)). These fit well in rocks glasses. Or try the smaller Tovolo Perfect Cube trays, which produce cubes that are just over 1 inch square.

### ***Spheres***

Like a large cube, a sphere also melts slower than most ice. If you take your Scotch over rocks, try pouring it over a sphere. "If you want a slight bit of dilution and temperature drop, [large cubes and spheres] do the trick without washing out and ruining your spirit," Mr. Joly said.

**How to make them:** The Taisin ice-ball maker melts and molds ice into seamless globes; molds range from 30mm to 80mm (from \$200, [japantrendshop.com](http://japantrendshop.com)). A cheaper option is Muji's ice-ball maker, which consists of two adjoining silicone semi-spherical halves, with a hole at the top for pouring in water (\$12, [muji.us](http://muji.us)).

### ***Big Block***

A large chunk of ice is like a blank canvas. With the right tools you can shape them into large cubes, spheres or spears to fit different size glasses. And unlike premade molds, having a piece carved from a large block will convey a more natural, organic feeling.

**How to make them:** If you have enough room in your freezer, fill a small cooler with water, pop the lid on and freeze the entire thing. "The water will freeze from the top down instead of outside in," said Chad Solomon, co-owner of the cocktail catering service and consultancy Cuffs and Buttons. Once out of the freezer, let your ice rest for at least 15-20 minutes room temperature. "If you're going to be making larger blocks in a freezer, the block will be very brittle when it first comes out of the freezer and prone to shattering if you try to carve it right away," Mr. Solomon warned.

**Get your tools:** try the Heavy Duty Pitchfork Ice Pick (\$52, [cocktailkingdom.com](http://cocktailkingdom.com)), and a rubber mallet. Carve on a stable surface lined with a polyethylene cutting board to prevent punching holes in what's underneath.

"Once rested, start by scoring the surface of the block with an ice pick marking the cuts you'd like to make," Mr. Solomon said. "Then using a rubber mallet, slowly drive a single point ice pick into the ice at various points along the scored line, the ice will start to separate along the line the more holes you make, and the deeper you go." A multi-prong pick is good to help finish the separation.

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