

In Any Cocktail, It's Elemental



By Rob Lowell

Ice

Coming of age in the Upper Midwest gave famed mixologist Tony Abou-Ganim a lifelong lesson in the wonders of ice.

No, not the slip-and-fall stuff that abounds in colder climes, though his childhood winters in Port Huron, Mich., had plenty of that. In his college years, as Abou-Ganim learned the ropes at his cousin's popular Brass Rail tavern, he came to appreciate just how critical ice can be to the well-made cocktail. "Ice is the heart and soul of any cocktail," says Abou-Ganim. "It's impossible to make great cocktails without great ice."

Abou-Ganim helped design and later run the cocktail lounge at Steve Wynn's fabled Bellagio resort hotel in Las Vegas. More recently, he began a consulting business and works with culinary legends such as Mario Batali. Yet it was at the Brass Rail that Abou-Ganim first witnessed the importance of ice and good ice-making equipment to a bar's ongoing success.

"We had an older Kold-Draft ice-making machine," Abou-Ganim recalls. "While it could be a bit temperamental, it dispensed perfect ice." This helped, in part, to cement the Brass Rail's reputation for excellent cocktails.

In the past decade mixology has enjoyed a renaissance. Adults who were once beer-and-wine loyalists have become more adventurous in their drinking habits. At the same time there has been an upsurge in newfangled drinks, or handcrafted cocktails, especially among younger consumers, in large cities and particularly, at popular hotels and resorts.

"Upscale cocktail lounges have become extremely fashionable in the past few years in larger metro areas such as New York, Philadelphia, Los Angeles, and Denver," notes Bob Weiss, northeast regional sales manager for Erie, Pennsylvania – based Kold-Draft. "In the new, upscale cocktail business ice is the Holy Grail - and not just any old ice cube, either. A perfectly square cube is called for, to ensure the perfect blend of liquor and to minimize dilution."

Weiss's company developed the industry's only one- and one-quarter inch ice cube – the perfect size, says Weiss, for an optimum mix. Still, different

drinks call for different kinds and different grades of ice. Scotch, particularly fine, single-malt scotch, requires a large, extra-cold cube that will melt slowly, minimizing dilution. In contrast, tropical drinks such as juleps, mojitos and daiquiris demand softer crushed ice to achieve their "slurpy" texture. Even a properly made bloody mary requires crushed ice.

Some creative barkeeps have even begun experimenting with ice in various sizes and colors to their signature cocktails. One

Manhattan hotel bar serves creamy concoctions in autumn flavored with – yes, you are reading this correctly – maple syrup and cinnamon ice.

While ice in drinks is considered an American tradition, today's cocktails have their roots in Britain. During Prohibition wealthy Americans would set sail for the British Isles to imbibe, and London's Savoy Hotel was a favorite destination. In the 1930s, the Savoy's Harry Craddock published the first widely-read guide to making cocktails: *The Savoy Cocktail Book*. It has reigned as a mixologist's Bible ever since.

Bartenders of Abou-Ganim's stature can immediately gauge the quality of an ice a bar uses by the sound it makes in an ice shaker. "Water is an ingredient in any cocktail – a martini calls for gin and vermouth, yet the ice is what makes the gin blossom," he says. "In terms of equipment I'm partial to the Kold-Draft double stacker. These units enable us to give our customers the cold, hard ice their cocktails require – and at the same time help us to keep up with demand in busy settings."

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Mixologist Tony Abou-Ganim



Now, as a consultant to the resort business, Abou-Ganim pores over the specs for new drinking establishments – often becoming an inquisitor of sorts on the subject of ice making. “A lot of designers will pay incredible attention to details such as where all the glasses go, the sound system, and the movements the bar staff will need to make – and not give ice its proper attention,” says Abou-Ganim.

“If I were serving a lot of non-alcoholic sodas or ice teas, this would certainly be less critical and I might not require the same type of equipment that I need for my cocktails,” he continues.

Mixologists often will go the extra mile in seeking perfection. Some barkeeps even prefer old-fashioned block ice because of its clarity; they painstakingly saw it into perfect cubes. They retain ice shavings for frappes and other sweet concoctions.

Abou-Ganim experiments at home. Interviewed by phone on New Year’s Eve, he was busy getting ready for family visitors – with a full menu of his signature drinks as treats. He often relies on distilled water to make ice for parties at home. He’s also been known to boil the water first – which leads to a more crystal-clear ice cube.

Refrigerators equipped with icemakers produce somewhat cloudy ice, Abou-Ganim points out. Worse, the ice that is in your freezer is as much as two weeks old when you serve it and will pick up the taste of any leftovers there – “such as last weekend’s grilled salmon,” he notes.

“As I’ve often said, nothing will wreck a drink quicker than crummy ice – so it’s always worth your attention as a mixologist!” Abou-Ganim says.

www.TheModernMixologist.com:

Tony Abou-Ganim’s website offers a wealth of information on bartending and includes some great recipes for signature drinks for all seasons.

www.manitowocfsusa.com:

This large company makes a full complement of equipment for the food-service industry, including a wide selection of ice-making equipment.

www.kold-draft.com:

The Kold-Draft company website provides you with information on the different types of ice and how proper icemaking can enhance an establishment.

www.iceomatic.com:

Denver-based Ice-O-Matic is a leading supplier of ice-making equipment for a variety of food-related applications – including bars and cocktail lounges.

***The Savvy Cocktail Book*:**

Harry Craddock’s classic is available on Amazon.com and at a variety of booksellers.