

HAPPY HOUR

Stirring secrets of cocktail ice

Those hard cold cubes play a chilling key role in how your drink ultimately tastes and goes down

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TORONTO STAR

It's counter-productive to sweat the ingredients in your cocktails if your ice can't get the job done.

Ice is a key player in how you build a cocktail, although we don't tend to think much about it. But how your ice melts, determined by size, surface and amount, affects the finished drink.

Many home bartenders wrongly think adding lots of ice to a shaker or drink will water it down. Au contraire, cocktail fans. It does the opposite, keeping the drink cold and that's why the pros pack shakers and glasses in the bar with ice.

"It has to do with the surface area of the ice and you want it as cold as possible," explains Steve Hughes, spirits scientist specializing in whiskey at Kentucky-based distillers Brown-Forman. The company counts made-in-Collingwood Canadian Mist among its brands.

"Use as much ice as possible in shaker or stirrer and try to agitate as quickly as possible to get those molecules moving," he says, adding the colder the mixture, the slower the ice melts and waters down the drink.

"You want good-quality ice. Use very clean water or filtered water," he adds.

And always ice first, then liquid.

I favour ice with a rougher surface, either cubes made in an old-fashioned metal tray with a pull handle, or the chunks you get in bags from the store or gas stations.

When a cocktail is shaken vigorously, small shards break off — this happens more readily with the rougher ice — and it adds an extra pop of coldness and texture to a drink.

You can break up your ice to get a similar effect; just wrap a few cubes in a tea towel and lightly pound with a rolling pin, or the bottom of a skillet. Put some muscle into it and you have crushed ice, which is perfect for serving liqueurs.

At the Pegu Club in New York's So-Ho neighbourhood, I watched the bartender make a martini by first breaking a few ice cubes in his hand with the back of a bar spoon and dropping them into the metal bottom of a cocktail shaker, then adding whole cubes.

He explained the different-sized ice performed two functions; small pieces melted a bit faster to smooth the alcohol as he swirled the metal shaker, while the big ice cubes rapidly cooled the cocktail.

Pegu Club owner Audrey Saunders takes ice as seriously as everything else at her bar. (So devoted is Saunders to making sure guests have a cocktail that tastes best to them, a small condiment set comes with Manhattans, so people can add a drop more sweet, citrus or aromatic bitters to customize the flavour.)

So it fits that her ice would be perfect: her staff uses 1 1/4-inch squares from a **Kold-Draft** icemaker that are bigger and more solid than regular bar ice, so they melt

more slowly and don't water drinks down.

The cocktails at the Pegu are exceptional. My favourite is the Tantris Sidecar, shaken sharply with ice to create those lovely frosty bits in the mix. It's a classy cocktail with lots of sass.

Rim a cocktail glass with a few drops of lemon juice and dip half the rim in sugar.

Add all ingredients to a cocktail shaker, except sugar and lemon peel. Shake sharply and well.

Strain into prepared glass.

To garnish, twist the lemon peel and let the oil spray on top of the cocktail.

Makes 1 drink.

Tantris Sidecar

From the Pegu Club, New York City.

Sugar
Fresh ice

1-1/4 oz Courvoisier VS Cognac

1/2 oz Calvados

1/2 oz Cointreau

1/2 oz fresh lemon juice

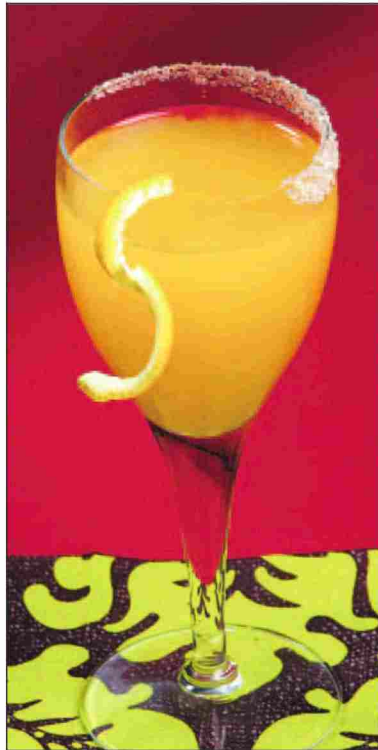
1/2 oz simple syrup

1/4 oz pineapple juice

1/4 oz Green Chartreuse

Lemon peel for garnish





RENE JOHNSTON/TORONTO STAR

The Tantris Sidecar, invented by Audrey Saunders and served at her bar, the Pegu Club in New York's swishy Soho district.