

# To Make a Better Cocktail, You Need the Right Ice

**ICE MIGHT BE THE MOST OVER-**looked ingredient of any cocktail recipe. It keeps a drink cold, ensures that it isn't too stiff, and even alters taste perception.

Ask a good bartender about ice, and they'll tell you why a particular shape or size is best. These variables might sound like minutiae, but they matter to bartenders, who have to strike a balance between ice's chilling and diluting effects. Ice cools a cocktail as it melts, but the meltwater also dilutes the drink's flavors. Some dilution is good—it balances flavors and tames high-proof liquor—but too much makes concoctions taste watery. The ideal combination of meltwater and a drink's other ingredients is called full dilution.

"The dilution and the temperature are inextricably linked," says Dave Arnold, author of *Liquid Intelligence: The Art and Science of the Perfect Cocktail*. "You don't get to have a colder drink and a less diluted drink. You can have either a colder drink or a less diluted drink."

One factor that affects the diluting power of ice is how you use it: Shaking is a more efficient

chilling method than stirring, meaning shaken drinks are served more diluted (and colder) than those that are stirred.

Size, shape, and temperature impact ice's melt rate, so some types of cubes make more sense than others to use under certain circumstances. But as long as you understand the fundamentals, you can make a great cocktail with any type of ice.

Large-format ice, generally cubes of 2 inches or larger, has a small ratio of surface area to vol-

ume. It melts more slowly than other types of ice. To reach full dilution, stir your drink with several cubes for 30 seconds, or shake with one cube for about 15 seconds. When you're shaking cocktails, "having the one big cube makes a huge difference in terms of the texture of the drink," Arnold says. The large cube aerates ingredients as it combines them, resulting in a cocktail with a thin layer of froth on its surface after you've strained it. The slow melt rate of large-format ice also





makes it the preferred type for serving with strong drinks such as the Old Fashioned (bourbon or rye with a sugar cube or simple syrup, two dashes of Angostura bitters, and an orange twist), which are best served cold and relatively undiluted.

Small ice chips, like those that come from store-bought bags or hotel vending machines, have a greater surface area-to-volume ratio. They melt faster, which can result in overdiluted drinks (bartenders refer to this as “shitty ice”). The trick to preventing such ice from trashing your cocktail is to use as much ice as will fit into your cocktail shaker, then stir or shake for a shorter amount of time—15 and 5 seconds, respectively—than you would when using larger ice. Keep in mind: Smaller ice isn’t always bad. Many tiki drinks and swizzles are served over crushed ice. In these cocktails, the continued chilling blunts the perception of sweetness.

“Regardless of shape or clarity, the temperature of ice, I would say, is the most important thing,” says Jeffrey Morgenthaler, bar manager of Portland’s Clyde Common, a restaurant where the bar program has garnered six James Beard Award nominations. Although water freezes at 32°F, ice is usually much colder. Ice purists might even go so far as to set their freezers to the lowest possible temperature so that their superchilled ice will cool cocktails faster and leave a less diluted end product. That said, even shitty ice can’t screw up a cocktail too badly. Just make sure you don’t skip ice entirely. No one likes a room-temperature margarita. **PH**



## How to Make Crystal-Clear Ice

It’s a big ol’ myth that trapped gases and impurities from cloudy ice negatively impact a drink’s flavor. (Unless that ice is from a deep freezer that hasn’t been cleaned in ages, of course.) But to wow a crowd, there’s nothing like serving a Negroni over a crystal-clear rock. “Anything that looks that awesome, I think, is going to make it taste a little more awesome,” author Dave Arnold says. Bartenders use professionally produced clear ice, but at home, you have to put in a little extra elbow grease.

**(1)** Fill a small hard-sided cooler with hot water from a faucet. Let the water cool, then place the cooler in your freezer with its lid open or off. Allow the water to freeze almost completely, which takes one to three days depending on

the cooler’s size and your freezer’s temperature. **(2)** Remove the cooler. Let the ice thaw slightly until it glistens, then invert the cooler onto a bar mat so the ice frees itself. Cloudy ice may have formed at the bottom of the cooler, while

the rest will be clear. **(3)** Set the block on its side, with the cloudy ice facing left or right. Cut off the cloudy portion by gently rubbing a bread knife back and forth on the top of the block until an indent forms. Then, while the knife is still touch-

ing the ice, tap the back of the blade with a mallet. The cloudy ice should break off cleanly. **(4)** Use the same method described in step 3 to cut the block into smaller 1- or 2-inch cubes. Use immediately, or place back in your freezer until needed.