

# Ice is an ingredient. Also, apparently, a personality.

A beverage white paper for QSR and cocktail lounges

By Aaron Harris | 3833 Capital | October 11, 2026

## The short answer

For a beverage-led QSR, nugget ice deserves a serious pilot: its soft, chewable texture can be part of the product, not merely a way to make it cold. Dense cubes or crescents are the sensible starting point for a broad menu and longer drinking occasions. Big clear ice belongs in selected spirit-forward cocktails, where appearance and the pace of drinking help justify the fuss. There is no one ice that wins every drink, every customer and every operating model.

That is the recommendation, not a universal consumer finding. Ice changes temperature, dilution, texture, visual value and how much liquid fits in the cup. Buy the experience you want. Do not buy a machine because its brochure says the frozen water has achieved enlightenment.



Dense crescent service ice [2]



Cubelet-category service example [2]

## The ice lineup

**Nugget / pellet / cubelet.** The Sonic-style family: soft, chewable pieces rather than miniature solid cubes. Good fit to test: fountain drinks, flavored teas, lemonades and other drinks where chewing is part of the pleasure. Good: tactile, distinctive, a potential signature. Bad: softer, wetter ice needs recipe and hold-time control. Ugly: designing a cup around an attractive ice pile, then discovering the drink has disappeared into it. [1,2,4]

**Cubes / half-cubes / crescents.** Dense service ice, with different geometries and dispensing behavior. Good fit: general QSR service, iced coffee and drinks expected to survive a longer trip. Good: familiar and versatile. Bad: hard ice is less inviting to chew; small pieces are not the same thing as a large slow-sipping rock. Ugly: calling all of these 'standard ice' and ignoring how differently they fill a cup. [2,4]

**Large clear cube / sphere.** Good fit: an Old Fashioned, premium whisky or another intentionally slow drink. Good: presentation and restrained ongoing melt relative to smaller pieces under comparable conditions. Bad: cost, storage, handling and glass fit. Ugly: a luxury iceberg in a drive-thru soda. The customer bought a drink, not a geological exhibit. [3,5]

Hoshizaki and Scotsman are manufacturers, not ice shapes. Hoshizaki sells crescent, cubelet and specialty ice; Scotsman offers both softer Original Chewable nuggets and harder H2 nuggets. Specify the actual ice and machine model. [1,2]

## What ice actually does to a drink

**Cooling and dilution are tied together.** Ice takes heat from the drink, much of it by melting. Ice straight from a freezer can absorb some heat as it warms before melting, so 'no cooling without dilution' is a useful bar shorthand, not an absolute physical law. A big cube cannot keep the drink maximally cold forever while refusing to melt. Water is part of the deal. [5]

**Smaller pieces change the speed, not the laws of physics.** More exposed surface per unit of ice can speed heat transfer. Wet crushed or small ice can also bring extra surface water into the glass before meaningful cooling happens. Ice temperature, starting drink temperature, ice mass, agitation and time all matter. Shape alone cannot predict the final dilution. [5]

**Serving ice is different from mixing ice.** Dave Arnold's cocktail experiments found that vigorous shaking approaches a similar temperature and dilution after roughly 12-15 seconds across common ice types, under his test conditions. Stirring is slower and more sensitive to technique. The ice left in the finished drink then governs another experience entirely. Expensive display ice is not automatically better shaker ice. [5]

**Clear is attractive; clear is not a safety certificate.** Appearance tells you something about the product, not whether the water, bin and scoop are clean. Quality has several jobs: neutral taste and smell, consistent size, appropriate hardness, controlled wetness, clean handling and reliable production. Test the water alone, the ice melted in a clean glass, and the finished drink. If the melted ice tastes like the walk-in, your garnish is a confession.

For iced coffee, judge ice with the actual coffee recipe, milk, syrup and expected drinking time. For fountain drinks, test with the actual dispenser and cup. For cocktails, set dilution during preparation and choose serving ice for the intended pace. These are operating recommendations; neither nugget nor clear ice rescues a poorly balanced recipe.

## The ugly is usually sanitation

Treat ice as food. FDA's 2026 model Food Code prohibits using ice that cooled exterior surfaces of foods or equipment as a food ingredient (3-303.11). It specifies protected scoop storage and cleaning of ice bins and enclosed ice-maker components at the manufacturer's frequency, or often enough to prevent soil or mold when no frequency is supplied (3-304.12; 4-602.11(E)(4)). Local adoption and requirements must be checked. [6]

Keep the scoop handle out of the ice, protect the scoop, maintain filters on their specified schedule, and document cleaning and sanitizing. An antimicrobial feature is not permission to forget the machine. A pristine-looking cube from a neglected bin is still a terrible business plan.

## Customer preference: a cult is not a census

Nugget ice has credible enthusiasm behind it. Sonic even lists a Cup of Ice as a menu item. That is evidence of ice as a product, not proof that most customers want it in every beverage. [7]

Scotsman's product presentation claims 'up to 80%' preference with soft drinks. It is supplier marketing, not a transparent, representative finding about your customers. The accessible presentation does not supply enough study detail to turn that number into a forecast. Nor does liking chewable ice establish preference in iced coffee, whisky or a drink carried around for half an hour. [8]

Working hypotheses worth testing: nugget for people who enjoy chewing ice and for beverage-led QSR positioning; dense cube/crescent for customers who care more about a drink's longer hold; one large clear rock for customers buying a premium spirit ritual. These are hypotheses, not a demographic law. Ask separately about first sip, last sip, texture and value. A single 'which is better?' question hides the tradeoff.



Premium cocktail service [2]



Gläce packaging [3]

## The \$10 cube: Gläce, not magic

The brand appears to be Gläce Luxury Ice. Its purchase page lists 40 pieces for \$325 delivered to the continental U.S., or about \$8.13 per piece by arithmetic. A separate mixed-case store listing shows 50 pieces for \$300 and says 'Unavailable', or \$6 per piece. These conflicting pages do not establish a dependable current quote or availability. '\$10 ice' captures the category's extravagance, but is not a verified price here. Confirm a live quote before budgeting. [3]

The seller's claims about purity and dilution are product claims, not an independent head-to-head test. A sphere has less surface area than other shapes of equal volume; that does not mean it maximizes cooling and minimizes dilution simultaneously. [3,5]

My take: bought-in luxury ice is a presentation expense. Reserve it for drinks whose price and guest expectations can support it. Compare it with locally supplied clear ice and in-house production, including labor, molds, freezer capacity, broken pieces and rejected pieces. At the purchase-page arithmetic, the ice alone contributes more than \$8 to a drink before spirit, labor or glassware. Frozen water has entered the jewelry business.

## The operator's denominator

Track cost per served drink, not just cost per pound: machine and installation, utilities, filtration, cleaning labor, service, downtime, waste and storage all belong in the denominator. Different ice shapes pack differently, so measure both ice weight and actual liquid fill. Do not claim an automatic syrup saving while quietly shrinking the customer's drink. Protect stated portions and perceived value.

## The straw wars: the mouth is the final quality-control station

A drink can have beautiful ice and still be ruined by the thing the customer drinks through. Choose straw bore and length for the beverage, lid and ice. Then test it for the entire intended drinking occasion. A straw that is magnificent for ninety seconds is not necessarily drive-thru equipment.



### 90-degree elbow, not a curly novelty straw

Schematic: the bend serves positioning and access.

**Paper.** Reduces reliance on conventional single-use plastic, but performance varies. Check softening, collapse, flavor, lid penetration and whether a replacement is needed. My opinion: a soggy straw is a small betrayal. The guest did not order a beverage with a damp permission slip in it.

**Straight plastic.** Usually a strong functional baseline for cold-drink service: stable shape and a predictable sip. But durability in the cup comes with persistence as waste. Use only products suitable for food contact and permitted in the location. 'It works' is not an environmental argument. [9]

**Bendy plastic, meaning a roughly 90-degree elbow.** Not the curly novelty straw. The adjustable bend can bring the opening to the drinker instead of requiring the drinker to reach the cup. For some disabled guests, flexible disposable plastic straws are an access need; paper, metal and reusable alternatives are not interchangeable substitutes. Where permitted, keep an appropriate option available and make it easy to obtain. No guest should have to narrate their medical history to get a drink. [10]

**No straw, where it works.** Offer a suitable sipping lid or direct-glass service when that suits the drink and guest. Less material is a cleaner starting point than arguing over which disposable tube is virtuous. Do not impose it on customers who need a straw.

## Green claims need receipts

A 2023 study of 39 straw brands sold in Belgium found PFAS more frequently in paper and bamboo straws. It does not prove every paper straw contains PFAS, nor establish the health risk of one customer's drink. Ask suppliers for food-contact compliance and evidence about intentional PFAS use; do not turn a country-specific sample into a universal scare story. [11]

Environmental comparisons depend on production, use, transport and disposal. 'Paper', 'plant-based' and 'compostable' do not by themselves describe the local waste pathway. Check what the waste contractor accepts and verify local straw rules before rollout. This paper is not a nationwide legal map. [9]

## Coffee stirrers: a tiny procurement item with main-character energy

**Wood** is my preferred starting point for a disposable hot-coffee stirrer, subject to testing: check smooth edges, splinters, odor, flavor and whether its length reaches the cup bottom. Do not assume every wood product is automatically safe, neutral or locally compostable.

**Plastic** can offer consistent dimensions and molded shapes, but the resin and finished product matter. Buy stirrers specifically suitable for the beverage's contact temperature and duration; do not treat an unlabeled plastic stick as a universal hot-liquid tool. Neither 'plastic poisons coffee' nor 'wood is harmless' is a responsible blanket claim. The supplier comparison is useful for procurement factors, not independent safety proof. [12]

**The best stirrer may be no stirrer.** Mix prepared drinks before handoff when the recipe allows. Offer a stirrer when the guest adds cream or sugar. Give it enough reach and stiffness to do the job. A two-inch stick in a tall cup is a procurement department writing slapstick.

# What I would actually do

1. Pick the beverage experience first. Pilot nugget against dense cube/crescent in your highest-volume iced drinks. Keep large clear ice for a small premium cocktail set, not the entire bar.
2. Run a blind A/B before a branded A/B. Use equal ice mass and liquid volume to compare behavior; then test each proposed real-world fill recipe. Hold starting temperatures and recipes constant. Judge at handoff, 10 minutes and 20 minutes, or at the actual customer hold time.
3. Score first-sip taste, last-sip taste, coldness, chewability, appearance and perceived value separately. Record ice/liquid weights, temperature, remaining ice and paid liquid portion. Do not infer dilution from the cup's appearance alone. Ask which customers prefer each version and why, rather than forcing one average winner.
4. Test accessories in those same cups. Include straight plastic, the 90-degree flexible straw and a qualified paper option where allowed; compare wood and temperature-rated plastic stirrers in hot coffee. Log collapse, kinking, off-flavor, splinters, replacement rate and access needs.
5. Audit the rush, not just the tasting table. Check recovery during peak demand, dispensing jams, scoop workflow, cleaning access, actual operating conditions and downtime support. Calculate the fully loaded cost per drink. Roll out only after guest experience and operating reliability agree.

Bottom line: nugget can be a brand asset; dense service ice can be a quiet workhorse; clear premium ice can be theater worth paying for. The winner is the ice that makes your actual drink better at its actual drinking time, without making the store worse. The scoop still has to be clean. Physics has no respect for your concept deck.

## Evidence and image credits

Accessed October 11, 2026. Recommendations and comic commentary are judgment. Vendor claims are identified; no new consumer study was performed. Numbered titles below are clickable source links.

- [1] Scotsman: softer Original Chewable vs harder H2 nugget
- [2] Hoshizaki: ice categories and service photographs
- [3] Gläce: purchase page, 40-piece/\$325 listing
- Also: conflicting 50-piece/\$300 listing marked unavailable.
- [4] KaTom: commercial ice-shape guide (retailer)
- [5] Dave Arnold, Cooking Issues: cocktail experiments (2010)
- [6] FDA: 2026 model Food Code, sections cited in text
- Full code PDF: 3-303.11, 3-304.12, 4-602.11(E)(4).
- [7] Sonic: Cup of Ice menu listing
- [8] Scotsman: Modular Flake & Nugget presentation (supplier claims)
- [9] BBC Future: environmental tradeoffs (2023)
- [10] NPR: disability access and flexible straws (2018)
- [11] Boisacq et al.: PFAS in 39 Belgian straw brands (2023)
- [12] Ancheng: wood/plastic stirrer procurement comparison (supplier)

Photo credits: Hoshizaki America (crescent, cubelet-category and specialty service images); Gläce Luxury Ice (packaging). Vendor service examples, not a controlled comparison. Straw drawing is schematic.