

A Chef's Approach

The Aviary cocktail lounge in Chicago operates more like a restaurant than a bar

Upon entering The Aviary—the experimental cocktail lounge from Chicago's premiere molecular gastronomist, Grant Achatz—guests are greeted by a view of employees hard at work making drinks. But instead of slinging cocktails behind a bar lined with stools, these chefs prepare orders in a kitchen that's separated by a steel fence, ensuring no interaction between customer and creator.

"We've taken the mentality of running a restaurant, but applied that to the bar," says Craig Schoettler, executive chef at The Aviary, which opened this past spring. "A bartender has three jobs: to entertain, to make drinks and to collect money. We've eliminated two of those three jobs. Our chefs don't have to entertain anybody and they don't have to collect money. They just have to make drinks."

Schoettler, who comes from a culinary background and cooked at Achatz's acclaimed Alinea for more than three years, has further streamlined the duties of his kitchen staff. At a restaurant, each chef station focuses on one type of cuisine, such as meat, fish or pasta. Schoettler has mimicked this system at The Aviary. "In a bar, every bartender has to know a countless number of cocktails," he says. "Our kitchen has five stations, and there are 30 cocktails on the menu, so every chef gets six drinks." Each custom-built station features everything the chef needs to prepare his or her designated cocktails, including the specific spirits, ingredients, ice, shakers and glassware. "So the chef doesn't have to move beyond a three-foot radius," Schoettler explains.

This high level of efficiency is necessary to keep The Aviary running smoothly. The venue makes between 300 and 350 cocktails per night, and these libations aren't your average drinks served in rocks glasses. Some come in a Bunsen burner-like contraption that's heated to steep a mixture of tea, nuts, dried fruit and herbs at the customer's table, while others are injected into a hollow ice sphere, which is then broken with a sling shot to release the concoction inside. "We've taken what we learned at Alinea and applied that philosophy to cocktails," Schoettler explains. "How can we manipulate the aroma, the sounds, the appearance and the vessel it's in? We play around with different ways of presenting the drink to engage the guest and provide a unique experience that they haven't seen in the cocktail world."

Despite the complexity of the drinks on the menu, cocktails arrive relatively quickly. "That's one thing we strive to do at The Aviary," Schoettler says. "There's nothing people hate more than waiting 20 minutes for a cocktail. So the time between the expediter calling out the order to the server walking the drink out is about three and a half minutes."

One way the venue offers such quick service is by preparing certain ingredients in advance. "Since there's no one sitting across from me at a bar, there's no need for me to stir an Old Fashioned à la minute," Schoettler says. For the Oolong cocktail (\$18), Tanqueray gin, Clear Creek pear brandy, citric acid, water and sugar are combined in a Cryovac bag and kept in an emersion circulator at 90 degrees Celsius. When the cocktail is heated at the customer's table, it only takes 90 seconds for the liquid to reach the appropriate temperature rather than 15 minutes. "Preheating it allows us to pack in the most efficiency," Schoettler explains.

The Aviary also has a staff member whose sole job is to make the ice for all the drinks. The venue has 20 to 30 types of ice, each serving a different function. "Our philosophy is



Craig Schoettler (far left), executive chef at The Aviary in Chicago, runs a highly efficient kitchen where the menu's 30 cocktails are divided among five chefs and prepared at specialized stations.

that ice is an ingredient," Schoettler says. "Typically, ice dilutes and cools, so why can't it dilute, cool and add flavor at the same time?" For example, mint ice cubes are used in the Chartreuse (\$20), which features three small cocktails—one comprising Green Chartreuse, honeydew juice and lime juice, one blending Yellow Chartreuse and blueberry soda, and one mixing both Green and Yellow Chartreuses with pineapple juice. There is also ice that's crushed, cracked, shaved like snow, formed into blocks for punchbowls and molded into tiny Angostura bitters spheres.

In the age of artisanal cocktails, bar operators like Schoettler are finding ways to deliver well-crafted drinks without sacrificing service.

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