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## Eat your drink: KC bartender creates edible cocktails

By LAUREN CHAPIN

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Forget everything you know about Jell-O shots: Their jiggle. Their gaudy color. Their slurp-it-down and slap-the-bar zaniness.

At the Drop, a restaurant and upscale bar in midtown Kansas City, owner Eddie Crane has banned the obvious comparison since creating several of his own edible cocktails.

The shimmery two-bite “Drops” come in six intoxicating flavors: Lemon Drop; Mojito; Godiva/Grand Marnier; Port Wine and Hazelnut; Amaretto; and Baileys Irish Cream and Coffee.

Crane’s experiment represents a kitchen chemistry trend that’s only just starting to shake out. But already folks are taking sides. Purists claim the edible cocktails are nothing but gimmickry, while bartenders practicing the bar-top wizardry dubbed “molecular mixology” think they are in the process of reinventing the cocktail.

“I’m a purist. My passion is liquid cocktails; that is what inspired me to look at molecular mixology,” Crane says.

“You can fly, drive or take a train to your destination. With the edible cocktails, I’m looking for a different way to get there.”

Perhaps it was only a matter of time before bartenders turned liquids into solids, using the same bit of kitchen wizardry pioneered by haute cuisine chefs. The cooking technique, known as spherification, was launched in 2003 at El Bulli, a beyond-the-cutting-edge restaurant in Spain.

There chef Ferran Adriá turned food preparation upside-down and inside-out as he began to use liquid nitrogen, gels, algae and calcium salts to turn liquids into “caviar,” “ravioli,” “noodles” and “gnocchi.” The process — which seemed more like a science project than cooking — moved from the Old World to the New World via Grant Achatz of Alinea in Chicago and Wylie Dufresne of WD-50 in New York City.

In the bar, spherification involves all sorts of Back to the Future-type gadgets and gizmos: magnetic agitators, calcium baths, beakers, precision scales and syringes.

Cointreau took the lead in molecular mixology almost three years ago, says Dana Nicholas, brand director for the famous French liqueur. After months of experimentation, the company launched Cointreau Caviar at the Cannes Film Festival in 2006.

Cointreau’s tiny pearls are flecked with edible gold and served floating in a flute of Champagne. Each pearl, with a skin slightly softer than a grape, is filled with liqueur.

The “caviar” made a stateside appearance at Daniel, a top-flight French restaurant in New York City, when head bartender Xavier Herit crafted his signature Strawberry and Pearls infused with wild strawberry puree, which he served alongside a strawberry margarita.

To help spread the concept, Cointreau developed two fail-proof recipes, assembled a spherification kit and offered additional training and mentoring for a short, highly targeted list of restaurants.

**Eat your drink**

But Crane is turning liquor into high-octane, hand-to-mouth bites without Cointreau's guidance.

His initial route from liquid to solid was a shaky one. He had read about the chefs making magic with liquid nitrogen and gelatins but nothing about bartenders transforming alcohol into solids.

Armed with some basic knowledge — the temperatures at which alcohol and nitrogen freeze — he made Cosmopolitan sorbet, Screwdriver ice cubes and his version of a chocolate martini, Dippin' Dots-style.

But the liquid nitrogen was expensive and the results were far too cold to immediately consume. The process was also complicated and too dangerous to work for any sort of mass production, so Crane ditched the project after spending a month of his time and nearly \$400.

Then he happened to catch an episode of the Discovery Channel's "MythBusters." It was the episode when the two hosts figure out how to solidify water just enough, using cornstarch, to walk on it.

And the wheels started turning again.

In October, Crane perfected a Mojito Drop. In July he introduced his current lineup.

Crane guards his information, although he will say he begins the same as any handcrafted cocktail, with ingredients poured into a tumbler *sans* ice. Each Drop has the same alcohol level and nutritional content as its liquid counterpart.

But that's about all he'll divulge. Even his wife doesn't know how they're made.

Meanwhile, customers are nibbling away, at a cost of \$12 for an order of three. Just a month after introducing them, Crane is selling 100 to 120 orders a week.

### **Shiny and new**

Molecular mixology "is a novelty for consumers, but this is the future of the cocktail industry. Bartenders are not just shaking cocktails" anymore, says Cointreau's Nicholas.

Not so fast, others claim, including master mixologist James Moreland with Bombay Sapphire, a brand of gin distributed by Bacardi.

"I'm a purist," he says. "Everyone has gone crazy with fresh and seasonal (ingredients), and that's the way it should be."

Moreland compares molecular mixology to Tom Cruise-style “flair bartending”: “It was good in the ’80s. It’s good in Vegas. I think it is a gimmick, and I can’t wait for it to go away.”

Still, Moreland tips his hat to Crane, who submitted a Drop for a competition sponsored by Bombay Sapphire.

“What he’s done has taken a lot of skill and talent,” he says. “The flavors that came through in the cocktails were amazing. But (the edible cocktails) are not a drink. It’s molecular. It is what it is.”

Crane, though, remains enthusiastic and has found the development process invigorating.

“Once you pull your brain out of that rut and think of things differently, all the rules go out the window,” he says. “You’re not just painting anymore, you can be a sculptor or write music.”

Plus there’s some bragging rights in being the first on the block to crack the code.

“I want the Drop to be known as *the* place in Kansas City to find out what is new and innovative,” Crane says.

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### **High-octane bites**

Eager to banish memories of the Jell-O shots of my youth, I sampled Eddie Crane’s edible Drops. Served on a plate, they had a firmer texture and more bite than the orange and cherry Jigglers I remember. They never melted or softened, even a smidge. And they really, truly tasted like their namesake cocktails, down to the long, smoldering, high-octane finish. Choose three for \$12.

- **Lemon Drop:** Made with citrus vodka, sweet-and- sour and Triple Sec and flecked with lemon zest. Very clean lemon taste.

- **Mojito:** Made with lemon-infused rum, mint-flavored simple syrup and flecked with lime zest. The tartest of them all. Very potent, with a pure, alcohol afterburn.

- **Baileys Cream and Coffee:** The Baileys layer is very creamy, while the coffee is sturdier with the flavor of espresso candy. The stickiest of the Drops.

- **Godiva/Grand Marnier:** The cocoa dusting on this one made it look like a truffle. Full of the orange essence of the Grand Marnier. Almost chewy, like a gummy bear.

- **Port Wine and Hazelnut:** Sprinkled with crushed hazelnuts, this burgundy- colored triangle was very grapey. The nuts added welcome texture.

- **Amaretto:** A layer of sliced almonds on the bottom makes this one especially pretty. Smells like almond extract. Sweet, not as high-alcohol flavor as the others.