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**SPECIALTY ICE IN BAR PROGRAMS  
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# FCSI WHITEPAPERS



# **SPECIALTY ICE IN BAR PROGRAMS**

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## Ice is an important part of any cocktail bar program and constant innovation in the sector means that there are ice makers to suit every need. This whitepaper explores the key issues to consider when choosing a machine that can optimize a bar program's revenue

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At first glance ice may not seem like a big deal in foodservice, but that's a common misconception.

"Ice is a food product; it's consumable," says FCSI Associate George Perry, director of design and principal, Innovative Foodservice Design Team. "The average 18- to 25-year-old [foodservice worker] doesn't always think about that. Ice machines help control some of the risk of contamination."

Plus, adds Perry, "if you're a high-volume operation and you run out, that's a big problem; especially because there are not as many places where you can just run down the street and get more ice."

As consumers are returning to bars, hotels and restaurants increase, more attention has turned toward in-house ice production. Ice has also become a bigger part of the concept development phase as of late, especially among designers for high-end hotels and restaurants offering craft cocktail programs.

Take it from Chris Leavitt, a bar and cocktail consultant in Las Vegas who spent years as a lead bartender and general manager for high-end hotels and fine dining restaurants in the hospitality destination.

When deciding whether or not to invest in a specialty ice machine, "the biggest thing for me is the type of concept and the level of elevation that we're trying to achieve," Leavitt says. "If it's a casual sport bar you don't need exceptional ice, but a [specialty ice machine] is a great solution for a craft bar or fine-dining restaurant."

Specialty ice machines, Leavitt says, add both visual interest as well as functionality. They're also more widely available now. These machines didn't even exist in the marketplace years ago. Bartenders were stuck with manually filling molds, a labor-intensive, sometimes messy endeavor that requires just as much storage to freeze and hold the cubes. They can also lead to poor quality ice.

"When you're using molds, it freezes from all directions; even if you're using purified water, you're not going to get all the air out," Leavitt says. "The best way to avoid air bubbles and impurities is to use directional freezing, which is what ice machines do."



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**Chris Leavitt**

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The labor savings alone with specialty ice machines make them worth it. “Not only is the cost of buying outside ice on the table, so is the cost of labor required to produce that ice – especially now. With a [specialty ice maker], you’re getting a better product, a more consistent product and more than enough volume with little to no labor – the math just checks out overall,” Leavitt says. “Now that the technology is available, investing in these machines is a no-brainer.”

When deciding on whether to invest in a specialty ice maker, there are some considerations to take into account. This whitepaper will address best practices for specifying, installing and maintaining specialty ice makers, and how they can enhance operations for high-volume bars, restaurants, hotels and entertainment venues.

### **TO INVEST OR NOT TO INVEST**

Deciding whether or not to invest in a specialty ice maker depends on a few key questions, says Kristen Sedej FCSI, president of S2O Consultants who specializes in entertainment and sports venue foodservice design.

“What are you trying to accomplish and how does it fit into your program? is the first question,” Sedej says. “No. 2 is what volume do you need? And you also have to ask does it make sense to buy ice or produce in-house? If I produce in-house, where will it go? Will local codes let me work directly out of the machine or do I need separate storage?”

Sedej notes that if operators are on the fence about purchasing specialty ice machines or don’t have the capital, it’s possible to lease the equipment. “You’ll pay more, but they’ll take care of all the maintenance,” she says.

Fortunately, specialty ice machines are more affordable than they’ve been in the past, and some models are compact enough to fit directly under the bar. “When we design founders suites, having ice makers that can produce specialty ice is really beneficial to programs with a strong cocktail program because they don’t have the labor,” Sedej says. “You may also have good water filtration and water from another ice maker that can be used.”

### **SPECIALTY ICE MAKER TYPES**

If you’ve decided to invest in a specialty ice maker, the next question is what type of ice do you want to use?

Leavitt says his go-to ice cubes are 1-inch by 1-inch cubes, which work well from both a shaking and stirring utility standpoint as well as from a presentation and display. He’s also a fan of the new sphere ice machines that produce round 1.8 inch diameter ball ice.

“These are great for more intimate settings where customers want to watch the bartender work,” he says. The shape and size of sphere ice (not the big balls you might see from time-to-time, those are only available as molds) actually help chill drinks faster without as much dilution.



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**Kristen Sedej FCSI**

Hoshizaki 1by1 freestanding ice cube makers are designed to fit under the bar counter

“Not to geek out too much, but if you’re making a Manhattan or Negroni, they act like ball bearings because they spin with such high velocity that it gives you more control when chilling. The speed matters because it’s a function of time and friction; you can stir longer to achieve the same results without dilution and you get that velvety texture, almost like when you put a bottle of vodka in the freezer. It’s a different mouthfeel all together.”

Sphere ice presents well in just about any type of glass, but Leavitt especially likes them in a high ball or Tom Collins glass “stacked on top of each other.”

Perhaps the more popular specialty ice type right now, though, is the 2-inch by 2-inch cube ice — perfect for an Old Fashioned and other classic cocktails. Just one unit can make just under 200 cubes, which is more than enough for most operations.

“If you’re a high-volume steakhouse and you have an Old Fashioned on your menu, you might blow through all of those 200 cubes in a night, so the investment in a machine makes sense,” Leavitt says. “Buying these cubes from an outside source might be too expensive or they might even be hard to find. You have to think of the cost-benefit analysis of buying a machine outright that you might be able to have paid off in a year or less.”



### **SPECIFYING SPECIALTY ICE MAKERS**

Once you’ve made the decision to invest in a specialty ice maker and you’ve decided on the type (or types) of ice you want and need, there are additional considerations when specifying specialty ice makers.

“The most challenging part is trying to track and understand your projected volume,” says Perry. “You need to have a good understanding of how many cocktails you intend to be able to serve in a 24-hour period and how many cubes you can get out of any particular ice machine in that time.”

For example, he says, “If I have an ice machine that makes 95 pounds of ice, I have to figure out how many cubes is that? If I know I’m serving 120 drinks and the ice machine produces only 60 cubes, that’s going to tell me that I need another ice machine.” Consultants have to do a little more due diligence to determine how many cubes the specialty ice maker produces in order to make the right recommendations on a machine.

You also have to consider the infrastructure of the space, says Sedej. That includes looking at the mechanical and water hookups and knowing where you’re going to position the specialty ice maker.

“Some health departments don’t like you working out of an ice maker, so then you have to determine where you’re going to store the cubes if you have to transfer them from the ice maker from the back,” she says.

**“You need to understand how many cocktails you intend to serve in a 24-hour period and how many cubes you can get out of any particular ice machine in that time”**

**FCSI Associate George Perry**

Sphere ice chills drinks more quickly but with less dilution

Leavitt says that ideally, there will be room under the bar to install the specialty ice maker. “You might install it on one side and then equip the other side of the bar with a small freezer or well for storing ice that can be replenished,” he says. This also cuts down on the number of times the bartender opens the ice maker bin, which keeps the internal storage temperature colder.

Perry says that if you have three service stations and two are designated as the primary stations, you might put the ice maker in between those stations underneath the front bar. “They’re not always the prettiest pieces of equipment so you wouldn’t necessarily put it on the back bar,” he says.

### **FILTRATION, FILTRATION, FILTRATION**

Just like any ice maker, “high quality water is crucial,” says Sedej. “It’s hugely important that you check your water quality, especially when installing specialty ice makers because you want them to be as clear as possible. The appearance and quality of the cubes is directly associated with the quality of water making the ice.”

Leavitt agrees. “You need to make sure you regulate the water pressure going into the machine,” he says. “Clarity is a big deal. It’s easier for the ice to hold its internal temperature when it’s clear and there are no impurities. If there are impurities on the outer layers, the liquid surrounding can leak into holes in the surface and create that white center on the inside, which you don’t want.”

Perry says his best practice is to install a water filtration at each point of use, even if the building or space has its own water filtration system. “You want to minimize as many contaminants in the water as possible because not only does it create variations in taste and cause inconsistencies, it can degrade the equipment,” he says. “The same is true for anything with a water connection.”

In warmer areas, proper filtration also mitigates the off-putting tastes of a water softener that might have been installed to prevent equipment damage.

### **SPECIALTY ICE MAKER MAINTENANCE**

There are daily and longer-term cleaning and maintenance needs for specialty ice makers, just like traditional ice makers.

“For specialty ice machines, you will want to empty the bin at the beginning of the day in order to have new ice ready when the bar opens,” says Leavitt. “That will make sure you have ice with minimal meltage. I also recommend cleaning out the ice machine bin regularly and making sure the drain is clean and clear so no water backs up into the bin which may cause clarity issues.”

Perry recommends following manufacturing guidelines when it comes to a regular, preventative maintenance program. That might include quarterly or monthly maintenance. “I generally recommend changing filters every six months, but it depends on the quality of water used,” he says. “It’s always best to test your water



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**Chris Leavitt**

Hoshizaki makes the only machines that produce sphere ice

because it can have a different impact on equipment depending on what part of the country you're in."

Don't forget about the compressor, either, Leavitt says. "As long as you're attending to all those needs you shouldn't have any sporadic problems with the machine."

The decision as to whether or not to invest in a specialty ice maker requires some due diligence and math, but in many cases, offers a huge payout especially amidst ongoing labor and supply challenges. Producing ice – just like other food products – in-house offers operators more control, consistency and quality over the long haul. ■



Calculating how much ice is served is important when deciding on the right Hoshizaki ice maker

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# Creative Cocktails

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