



*Cocktails
You Can Chew*
by Belle Frejillana Ramirez



GRACE YIU

Earl Grey Tea Martini— Martini with tea-infused bubbles

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Godiva Burst— Godiva Liquor-encapsulated globules

Beakers, syringes and precision scales are usually associated with scientists. So are liquid nitrogen, calcium chloride and sodium alginates. But recent moves to incorporate these tools and substances into basic bartending have created a splash in the local night scene.

Molecular mixology takes its inspiration from molecular gastronomy, a cooking concept which involves using scientific techniques to change the texture, viscosity and appearance of food and drinks without compromising their tastes.

“In molecular mixology, it is all about mixing classic cocktails in a different manner to give an unexpected drinking experience by using chemical-based gels, powders, foams, grills and airs,” said Antonio Lai Chun-nam, mixologist and bar manager at FINDS in Lan Kwai Fong.

These special methods can only be achieved by using laboratory tools such as smoke guns, beakers, precision scales, and syringes; and chemical compounds such as nitrous oxide, lectin, liquid nitrogen, sodium alginate and calcium chloride.

Lai, one of the pioneers of science-inspired drinks in Hong Kong, revamped the menu at the Scandinavian restaurant and bar in April this year. He added 16 molecular cocktails that range from flavour-infused cocktails to edible alcohol.

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Earl Grey Tea Martini is one of the highlights on the menu. Lai stirs up air around tea with a milk-frother which is also used in coffee shops for making foam for cappuccino. Then he lays the tea-infused air bubbles on top of the Martini. This enhances the Martini’s refreshing vodka and cucumber.

The Earl Grey pearls in the “drink” add more fun to the mix. These “pearls” are not the jewels you would find in shells, but a bunch of tea-encapsulated jellies formed by the reaction of tea, calcium chloride and sodium alginate. If you put them in your mouth, they will literally burst, releasing the alcohol inside them.

“Not only does this enhance the taste itself, but it also adds dimension and personality to the drink because, visually, you are drinking a three-layered Martini: pearl, tea and the frothy air,” said Lai.



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Mixologist Antonio Lai Chun-nam makes rock-like ice cream with liquid nitrogen.

Lai also brings traditional cocktails to a new level. You might wonder what a *Panda Colada* is when you see it on the menu. Yes. He transforms the classic Pina Colada into *Panda Colada*.

The ingredients and taste are the same as the classic rum and pineapple juice, except that Lai manipulates the texture and appearance.

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“It is purely made from gelatine in the shape of a panda with the original taste of a Pina Colada. Aesthetically,

the panda’s head rests on a bed of sliced pineapple that is infused with rum,” the mixologist said.

He added that the gelatine naturally leaves its solid state after about 30 minutes, hence making it “drinkable”.

“I really liked the presentation of the *Panda Colada* because it made it more fun to eat or drink. It’s like you get a dessert and then 30 minutes later it turns into a drink. Genius!” said Mira Sawlani, a 27-year-old guest at FINDS.

One potential danger in the world of molecular mixology is using liquid nitrogen, said Lai, a mixology veteran of 12 years. “This is four times colder than dry ice! If you leave your finger in it for a few seconds, say bye-bye to it,” he said.

Despite this, it is one of the main ingredients of molecular cocktails. Lai foams a cocktail with Bombay Gin, lime and cream. Then he dips a mouthful



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Ingredients have to be carefully measured, Lai said.

of cocktail into liquid nitrogen. The refrigerant immediately produces a rock-like ice cream with an espresso aftertaste.

Indeed this emerging trend of edible cocktails blurs the boundary between eating and drinking. It is precisely the blurred boundary that makes molecular cocktails such a hit with young drinkers.

“Sex on the Beach is so 80s and I think molecular cocktails are a good reflection of our technologically advanced time. We are part of a generation where we want something that stimulates our taste buds, sight and sense of smell, as well as stimulate our mind so we ask: how do they do that?” said guest Sawlani.

While FINDS offers a variety of sci-fi drinks and is constantly creating new ones, Lotus Restaurant and Cocktail Lounge in Central has chosen



COURTESY OF ANTONIO LAI CHUN-NAM

Lai makes cocktails with equipment commonly used in laboratory like beakers, syringes and precision scales.

to keep the traditional spirit of the food pioneered by the founder of molecular gastronomy. It offers foam-based molecular cocktails.

“Ferran Adria, the Spanish chef behind modern molecular gastronomy started his techniques by using foams, which then shifted to foamed-drinks,” said Manoj Gurung, the mixologist and bar manager at Lotus.

He said their bar’s consultant went to Spain to pick up ideas in molecular gastronomy and introduced molecular cocktails three years ago.

He explained that foam-based food uses chicken-steak-based foam. When a diner eats it, it tastes like chicken. “So it is the same with molecular drinks which are foam-based. I can give you

foam and it will taste like apple without you biting into an apple.”

Foamed-drinks are made with fruit-flavoured liquids such as apple, coconut, grapefruit and pineapple which are dispensed through a whipped cream canister. Gurung uses protein to coagulate the ingredients and then charges it up with nitrous oxide to create the foam.

He said that in order to keep customers satisfied, you need drinks that are carefully measured and balanced, in terms of foam and alcohol level.

“Creating drinks that are chemically-based has to go by the book and carefully measured. It is very much like cooking – too much of something ruins the taste and texture,” he said.

Despite Hong Kong’s fast-paced lifestyle, Gurung said the cocktail scene in Hong Kong is a few years behind London, and cities in the US and parts of Europe. “People are scared to try new things especially when it comes to alcohol. It has been a challenge,” he said.

But in recent months, cocktail lounges have been experimenting with their drinks. Both Lai and Gurung are hopeful there will be a gradual shift from molecular gastronomy to the novelty of molecular mixology.

“I saw that a couple of restaurants and bars have introduced molecular mixology and this is a good thing. It shows that people really notice when something different is in the market,” Lai said.

He said the trend will keep rolling and as a next step, it would be a great idea to incorporate local elements into these cocktails. “But bartenders have to understand what they are doing first. I mean molecular mixology is hard to learn. At this moment, Hong Kong does not have a really good mixologist that has the understanding and enthusiasm to introduce molecular cocktails.”

Others are not so sure about the trend. One mixologist with 15 years experience catering to the Hong Kong crowd is sceptical. He said people still prefer to sip their drinks than to chew them.

“We have a robust and very thirsty crowd on most nights of the week and they want something that can naturally quench their thirst,” said the bar manager who wished to remain unidentified.

Some drinkers also prefer traditional cocktails. Commenting on some of the molecular cocktails that she has tried before, Julia In said that she prefers ordinary cocktails because she can taste how strong the drink is.

“How can you quench your thirst with foam, it’s like paying for the beer top with no liquid. I call it spaceship food,” she added. ▽