

The Many Types of Ice Cubes — And Which One Guests Prefer Most

By Eric Faber, Founder & CEO of U.S. Restaurant Consultants December 2024

Ice is one of the most underestimated elements of beverage service. Yet it directly affects appearance, dilution rate, mouthfeel, and customer perception. The type of ice your operation chooses can influence everything from bar productivity to cocktail consistency to guest satisfaction.

Here's a breakdown of the most common forms of ice in restaurants and bars—along with an analysis of which type guests actually prefer.

1. Full-Cube (Large Cube)

Description: The classic square or rectangular cube.

Best For: High-volume restaurants, bars, full-service dining.

Advantages:

- Slow melting, thus less dilution
- Creates a clean, premium beverage appearance
- Ideal for cocktails, sodas, and highballs

Drawbacks:

- Uses more energy to produce than smaller cube types

Consultant's note: Full cubes are the “gold standard” for general beverage service because they balance aesthetics and functionality.

2. Half-Cube (Half Dice)

Description: Smaller rectangular cube that fills a glass more densely.

Best For: Quick-service restaurants, banquets, high-volume soft drink service.

Advantages:

- Produces a higher displacement, making drinks appear fuller
- Excellent for quick chilling
- Easy to blend—popular for smoothies

Drawbacks:

- Melts faster, leading to quicker dilution

Consultant's note: The higher surface area makes this the go-to for fountain drink programs.

3. Nugget Ice (Chewable Ice / Pellet Ice / “Sonic Ice”)

Description: Soft, airy, small pellets—lightly chewable.

Best For: Fast casual, drive-thrus, specialty beverage programs.

Advantages:

- Extremely chewable—a cult following
- Absorbs flavor, making drinks taste stronger
- Fast cooling and ideal for teas, lemonades, and sodas

Drawbacks:

- Melts quickly
- Machines are pricier and require more maintenance

Consultant’s note: Nugget ice has one of the strongest fan bases of any ice type.

4. Crushed Ice

Description: Finely crushed pieces, typically produced by crushing full cubes.

Best For: Tiki bars, frozen cocktails, mint juleps, upscale bar programs.

Advantages:

- Fastest cooling
- Essential for certain classic cocktails

Drawbacks:

- Very short lifespan in the glass
- Rapid dilution

Consultant’s note: Crushed ice is about style as much as function—and it’s indispensable for some cocktails.

5. Gourmet / Top-Hat Ice (Large Cylinder with Dimple)

Description: Premium, slow-melting ice with crystal clarity.

Best For: High-end bars, craft cocktail programs, hotel lounges.

Advantages:

- Superior clarity and presentation
- Minimal dilution
- Elevates premium spirits and cocktails

Drawbacks:

- Expensive machines
- Slower production rate

Consultant’s note: When you want your bar to look “elevated,” this is the cube you choose.

6. Sphere Ice (Hand-Carved or Molded)

Description: Large round ice balls used mostly in whiskey and craft cocktails.

Best For: Cocktail bars, steakhouses, upscale lounges.

Advantages:

- Slowest melting ice form
- High visual impact
- Perfect for bourbon, Scotch, and spirit-forward drinks

Drawbacks:

- Time- and labor-intensive unless using molds
- Not ideal for high-volume bars

Consultant's note: Sphere ice is now a signature of modern mixology.

7. Crescent Ice

Description: Half-moon shape, common in convenience and fast-food settings.

Best For: QSRs, casual dining, self-serve soft drink stations.

Advantages:

- Resists clumping
- Pours and scoops easily
- Efficient machine output

Drawbacks:

- Melts slightly faster than full cubes

Consultant's note: Crescent ice is the workhorse of the industry—simple, effective, and consistent.

So... What's the Most Popular Ice Type?

From a consumer-preference standpoint, **nugget (chewable) ice consistently ranks #1** in surveys, social media sentiment, and operator feedback. Its cult following is unmatched, especially among fast-casual and drive-thru guests.

However, **for restaurants and bars**, the most widely used and most practical ice remains the **full-cube**, due to its versatility, slow melt rate, and universal compatibility with both alcoholic and non-alcoholic beverages.

Most Popular with Consumers: Nugget Ice

Most Popular with Restaurants/Bars: Full-Cube Ice

Consultant Recommendations

Choose Full-Cube If...

- You run a full-service restaurant or bar
- Consistency and dilution control matter
- Presentation is important

Choose Nugget Ice If...

- You operate a fast-casual, QSR, or drive-thru
- Guests crave chewable ice
- Cold specialty drinks are part of your menu

Choose Premium Shapes If...

- You run a craft cocktail program
- High visual impact drives sales
- You want to distinguish your bar program from competitors