

COLD PLAY

Chefs are experimenting with unusual flavor and texture combinations in cool new sorbets

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With all the heat in restaurant kitchens, is it any wonder chefs love to play with ice as much as they do with fire? Especially as temperatures rise outside, they're escaping to the cooler corners of their kitchens to experiment with ice cream machines, Pacojets and blast freezers.

This impulse toward cold play makes sense: The pyrotechnics that form so much of a chef's creative repertoire need a polar opposite, in both degree and kind. But the newer cool kitchen tools—tanks of liquid nitrogen and the Grant Achatz-inspired Anti-Griddle, which looks like a Xerox machine and freezes things on contact—come with prohibitively steep price tags. They're also pretty cumbersome, considering that most restaurant kitchens resemble cramped broom closets more than spacious warehouses.

So what's an innovative chef to do? Treat that trusty ice cream machine the way physicists treat their particle accelerators.

"I'm limited by technology," says Providence pastry chef Adrian Vasquez, who has a tank of liquid nitro on the wish list he's given to chef-owner Michael Cimarusti. Until then, Vasquez is bringing new intensity to his sorbets and ice creams, pairing flavors and textures in ways that transform the frozen stuff into a new art form.

While he sometimes uses his Pacojet—a pricey Swiss-made machine that can blend previously frozen ingredients to a smooth, creamy consistency—other times he's relying on the ice cream maker. A quenelle of litchi-shiso sorbet perfectly balances a bowl of white-chocolate, coconut and soy-milk soup. Carrot sorbet, accompanied by wasabi peas and a dusting of carrot powder, is subtle and deliriously fresh, the sweetness brilliantly coaxed from the carrots. And highlighting an appetizer of Dungeness crab atop a tiny dice of cucumber is a vadouvan sorbet, the blend of Indian spices adding a zing that comes slowly. "I love the mouth feel of well-executed ice creams and sorbets. And the possibilities," he says.

At Sona, pastry chef Karen Yoo uses the coffee-maker-sized Pacojet to spin fresh basil into a buttermilk sorbet. Paired with a lemon sorbet made with candied Meyer lemons, and tiny red-and-white Chino Farms fraises de bois, it's a subtly intricate study in flavor, texture and color.

Recently Yoo used the Pacojet to spin a toasted brioche ice cream, as well as an intensely floral and almost spicy juniper-berry ice cream, which she paired with warm blackberries and a phyllo peach tart. And for an intricate play on descending textures as well as temperatures, Yoo put pixie tangerine granita in a bowl with a quenelle of matcha ice milk, then brought it all together with milk jam espuma and lychee gelée. (Yoo also has a tank of nitro on her wish list.)

For chef Craig Strong of Pasadena's Ritz-Carlton Huntington Hotel & Spa, the impulse to work simultaneously with fire and ice is powerful. A favorite amuse bouche is hot English pea soup topped with mint sorbet. "It's not just a soup, it's an idea," says Strong, who presents his rendition of hot and cold at the start of the meal instead of at the end, when you would expect it. "It changes the position," he says. "It wakes you up; playing with hot and cold makes food more exciting."

Strong loves to mix and match traditional dessert sorbets with savory dishes. A single Kumomoto oyster on the half shell comes with a tiny scoop of green apple sorbet. The sorbet keeps the oyster on ice, so to speak, and provides the perfect chaser. Strong also lays out an elegant composed salad of shrimp and vegetables à la Grecque—and at the end, a delicate pink scoop of watermelon sorbet. The dish is a study of thesis and antithesis; who'd have thought a vegetable salad could be Hegelian.

At Melisse, chef-owner Josiah Citrin likes to orchestrate his temperature combos, matching fruit sorbets with seared foie gras. Depending on the season, he'll pair the foie gras with huckleberry sorbet or one made with spiced cranberry. When tomato season heats up, he'll make a dense Japanese tomato sorbet and place it atop a brunoise of summer squash spooned into the center of a bowl of creamy, and very hot, Mandarin tomato soup. "The hot and cold together makes your mouth water," Citrin says.

In downtown L.A. at the Water Grill, chef David LeFevre twins a creamy avocado frozen mousse with an artful crab Louis. Another appetizer showcases a dense quenelle of beet sorbet alongside a composed salad of beets, goat cheese and watercress. "You have the familiar flavor," says LeFevre, "but the texture is unexpected."

Water Grill pastry chef John Park has been taking a turn at the ice cream machine too (their Pacojet is on order), recently making a "creamsicle," half blood orange sorbet, half vanilla ice cream, which he matches with tart pink grapefruit granita and warm pistachio cake.

At Hatfield's, pastry chef Karen Hatfield opts for restraint over flashy experimentation, but her desserts are just as nuanced as those of more overtly playful chefs. An intensely flavored passion fruit-elderflower sorbet sits next to a perfectly executed buttermilk panna cotta, the differing textures and temperatures complementing each other.

You can see this kind of interplay at Wilshire's recently inaugurated Ice Cream Shoppe night. Every Tuesday pastry chef Danielle Keene serves up innovative flavors—lemon verbena ice cream, coconut-lemongrass sherbet, cherimoya sorbet, even a caramel-bacon ice cream—but it's her strawberry float that demonstrates her technique and vision. Atop a tall beaker of house-made strawberry soda sit two scoops: one an intense strawberry sorbet, the other a lime-basil sherbet. The fizz of the soda creates a froth at the intersection of the temperature zones. Keene calibrates the sherbet so that it melts faster, lapsing into the foam of the soda, while the sorbet takes longer, fading slowly in the glass and on the palate as you sip the mixture through a pink biodegradable straw.

Over at Joe's in Venice, chef de cuisine Joshua Gil (who calls his Pacojet his "baby") loves the fault lines on menus, designing sorbets to fit dishes that ride the fence between sweet and savory, and between the courses themselves. A white asparagus gelato with balsamic-marinated strawberries is like an unexpected turn down a garden row. He's paired a kaffir lime-curry sorbet with carrot soup and grilled sepia, and experimented with spinning smoked trout into a mascarpone gelato. But his favorite dish is one he serves omakase style when the ingredients and his mood coalesce. It's a tiny tower of seared scallop and foie gras, topped with fresh uni. Drawn beside it is a line of rhubarb-ginger purée, and next to that, wasabi-apple sorbet. The jolt and freeze of the sorbet, topped with micro herbs for additional texture, operates as both palate cleanser and flourish.

Josef Centeno of Opus has his own hybrid creations. Recently he topped raw hamachi with an intense yuzu sherbet. And on the dessert menu, he paired cherry and tarragon pie with celery sorbet. The sorbet, barely sweetened and a gorgeous pale green, tasted exactly like, well, celery. But matched with the pie, filled with tart cherries and tarragon and topped with a spectacularly flaky crust, the cool, earthy notes were unexpected and just about perfect.

Back at Providence, Vasquez recently confided that he loves his ice cream machine so much that he wants to open his own ice cream shop someday.

We'll see what happens after he gets that tank of liquid nitrogen for Christmas.

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