

THE TROUBADOURS OF DRINK



It began when alums Allen and Sarah Hemberger were captivated by the *Alinea* cookbook and its astounding blend of food and imagination. Now the couple's artistry, creativity and marketing acumen are at work, singing the praises of new adventures in taste.

BY TARA HUNT MCMULLEN '12

In a highball glass sits a hollow sphere of ice. Inside the ice sits a perfectly chilled Old Fashioned, piped through a small hole with a syringe. To get it out, you're handed a slingshot. So goes one of the amusements at Chicago's The Aviary, a sleek lounge serving up wildly imaginative cocktails and bites. Calling The Aviary a bar seems wrong. So does calling *The Aviary Cocktail Book*, published in 2018, a "cocktail book." It's not inaccurate per se, but it's a major undersell. Instead, the book is more like a trip inside the minds of the Willy Wonkas of liquor and food and photography. It's otherworldly and zany and a little overwhelming.

Several recipes call for the spherification of a liquid — such as rum or brown sugar syrup or cucumber juice — using combinations of calcium lactate and sodium alginate, which creates little membrane-spheres full of flavor. Other drinks are served in "pillows" — plastic bags filled with aromatics that engulf patrons when they slice the bags open. Another might arrive in a plume of dry ice and resemble a mad science experiment gone wrong.

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The book has sections on flavored ice and drinks served in vacuum pots. The recipe for "Green Thumb" calls for hot dogs. "Infernal Imagery" comes in a treasure chest filled with applewood smoke. Another drink is titled "Jesus Can't Hit a Curveball." And so on and so forth, for 400-plus eye-catching, mind-bending pages.

The cocktails, and the Chicago bar that serves them up, are the creations of chef Grant Achatz and restaurant executive Nick Kokonas — both of the city's famed, three-Michelin-star-winning Alinea — along with beverage director and "ice chef" Micah Melton. But the book is the brainchild of Allen and Sarah Hemberger.

The Hembergers aren't restaurateurs by trade. Nor were they proficient bar-keeps. By training, Sarah '05 is a digital

painter and Allen '01 is a digital-effects artist. They have worked on movies like *Avatar*, *Brave*, *The Avengers*, *Finding Dory* and *King Kong*. Their foray into the restaurant world was accidental.

On one of their first dates, Sarah and Allen went to Alinea, then in its early, pre-Michelin, pre-James-Beard, pre-"Best Restaurant in the World" days. The couple was wowed by 23 courses of imagination, molecular gastronomy, nostalgia-triggering dishes and theater. Years later when the restaurant published a cookbook, Sarah bought it for Allen as a Christmas gift.

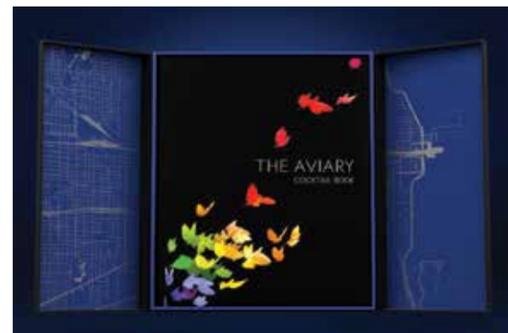
The cookbook, Allen felt, was a dare from the folks at Alinea to try — just try — to cook like them. He decided he'd take on a recipe, the one he deemed easiest: "dry caramel, salt." Easy it was not. It took three attempts and required him to source maltodextrin. But

on that third try he recreated the powdered, dusty caramel that magically melts into a warm, soft caramel in your mouth, and an obsession was born. One recipe became two, and three, and four, until five years later, Allen had cooked the entire book — from "granola in a rosewater envelope" to "ayu, kombu, fried spine, sesame."

The food, Allen explains, is kind of a by-product. What most delighted him about Alinea and its cookbook is that the geniuses behind them had created dishes that harness an emotion or memory and serve it on a platter.

"They're just looking around all the time trying to figure out how to give somebody these little presents. It's got almost nothing to do with the food itself. They'll say all the time around here, 'Making it taste good is not the hard part. . . . You can make a burger

As for the recipes themselves, many are a bit out of reach for your average home mixologist — unless one has access to equipment like an immersion circulator, a smoking gun, a carbonation device, a cotton-candy machine and a volcano vaporizer.



taste good. . . Does this make you *feel*?”

Allen offers an example from *Alinea*, the cookbook: a plain-looking nugget of meat skewered on an oak branch. At first glance, it’s nothing special. Then you set the leaves on fire, and instantly the scent of oak leaves fills the room and transports you.

“Anyone from the Midwest knows what that smells like,” Allen raves. “The second you smell that, it’s like you’re a six-year-old again. It’s immediate. You don’t even have to see the dish. You get a whiff and you’re like, ‘Someone is burning a pile of leaves around here.’”

“The thing I enjoy about the *Alinea* stuff, there’s some part of problem-solving, and making the dishes is interesting, but the most fun part is saying, ‘Hey Sarah, come check this out.’”

He invited others to check out his progress, too. Allen photographed and blogged about every step of his exploration of the 107 *Alinea* recipes and gained some notoriety of his own in the process, even starring in a minidocumentary called *Allen & Alinea*. He had made the foams and gels and powders that puzzle and delight the restaurant’s guests. He had learned to woodwork and weld in order to create vessels similar to those used in its kitchen. He had built relationships with the purveyors of rare ingredients. And he had become a superfan of Achatz. Once the project was complete, Sarah encouraged him to turn it into a book to commemorate the experience.

It’s essential to understand that Allen and Sarah did not simply print out Allen’s blog along with 4-by-6 snapshots of the dishes and slap them into a photo album. It seems the Hembergers don’t do anything halfway. They share an insatiable appetite for learning and go 1,000 percent into every endeavor. That’s obvious in Allen’s voice on the blog, in the book and in person. When asked what he does in his free time, he effuses about learning how to sew because he wondered how jeans are made. For a while he was interested in blacksmithing and learned to make knives in his garage. Sarah has reupholstered furniture and made candles and jewelry. The couple taught themselves to make soap using leftover oils and fats from their kitchen. The breadth of their curiosity is limitless, and they have the talent to match it.

So when they decided to make a book, it wasn’t a simple scrapbook. They ditched the customary print-on-demand options and instead sought a company that could help them print a tactile, high-end book without the need for a publisher. They learned about printing, binding and cargo-shipping in order to complement their already honed skills in design, layout and writing. When all was thoroughly researched, Allen opened a Kickstarter fund to raise \$28,500 so he could print 750 copies of an artistically designed and shot, museum-quality book he titled *The Alinea Project*. In one month, in April 2014, he had over \$42,000 to produce an account of his foray into molecular gastronomy.

The Hembergers sent the first three copies to *Alinea*. The next day, Nick Kokonas called with a job offer.

The proposal was loose: Find creative ways to use their artistic skills with the restaurant group, which now comprises six, and soon to be seven, very different restaurants. They could design, photograph, videotape, publish or do whatever they deemed interesting. The couple freelanced projects from teaser videos to menu, label, logo and website design until

the team at *Alinea* said the time was right for the Hembergers to quit their film jobs, move to Chicago and become the group’s new directors of media and publishing.

A happy hiccup nearly derailed them — a baby daughter named Miramar — but Kokonas offered options to work from home, set up a crib in the office or whatever it took to help the couple achieve a favorable work-life balance.

“It was the flexibility of the job that I found really appealing,” Sarah recalls, noting she has since become a superfan in her own right.

Once the Hembergers had settled in Chicago, Kokonas revealed he had long wanted to create a cocktail book — but not a tiny bar manual as sits on every home bar cart and liquor cabinet. He wanted a giant, stunning coffee-table book that would capture the drama of *The Aviary*’s menu, but he knew typical publishers wouldn’t spend the money or time on such an enterprise.

The Hembergers were up for the challenge.

Allen tackled the photography and writing while Sarah designed, worked on layouts and illustrated emoji versions of the bar and the cocktails. They learned how to write recipes and sharpened their bartending skills. They shot and reshot 10,000 photos until they captured each drink. It took two years to complete the book, and at the end they ordered an initial run of 30,000 copies, which quickly sold out. The group has since printed another 40,000 that retail for \$85 — or \$135 for the reserve





Sarah and Allen Hemberger: "The breadth of their curiosity is limitless, and they have the talent to match it."

edition that "comes enclosed in a custom-designed, display-worthy clamshell case" — at theaviarybook.com.

As for the recipes themselves, many are a bit out of reach for your average home mixologist — unless one has access to equipment like an immersion circulator, a smoking gun, a carbonation device, a cotton-candy machine and a volcano vaporizer. But with the right ingredients, some ingenuity and a bit of free time, the other cocktails are crazy but possible.

Yet the goal of *The Aviary Cocktail Book* might not be to recreate each recipe as much as to encourage readers to think like chefs and bartenders.

"One of my favorite cocktails in the book is . . . very boring-looking," Allen says. "It's brown liquid and served in a giant plastic bag. At the table they cut the bag open and pull the drink out. The drink is good, but what's amazing is when you cut the bag open, the thing you smell is this incredible aroma of oats and cinnamon and brown sugar and allspice. Most people are like, 'that smells amazing, what is that?'"

"It's the smell when you rip open a bag of Quaker Instant Oatmeal. . . . Some chef woke up and ripped open a bag of oatmeal and was half-awake and had to go to work and was like, 'This is an amazing smell. How do I give someone this experience?'"

The Hembergers have started thinking that way, too. Allen even published a cocktail recipe of his own in the newly released *The Aviary: Holiday Cocktails* booklet. The 100-page guide features approachable cocktails like a key-lime-pie mimosa, a cider margarita and a pumpkin royal fizz. They're now at work on a summer cocktail handbook for home cooks — another outlet for their "hard-earned knowledge," Sarah explains.

They're also busy with a laundry list of other projects. In July the Alinea group launched the St. Clair Supper Club, which offers a retro spin on classic Midwest dishes like prime rib and grasshopper pie. The restaurant's casual vibe is a far cry from the highbrow Alinea, but the throwback style had Sarah jazzed.

"The design work for this is one of the most fun projects I've done," she says, noting the website's satirical, mid-'90s, HTML2 style. "Most of the others are fine dining and buttoned-up, but this is very personality driven."

When we tour the St. Clair Supper Club days after its opening, the chef stops Allen to chat about how the Oysters Rockefeller will appear at the next day's photoshoot and to ask which sauce will look best on the prime rib.

The interaction is indicative of the Hembergers' role within the restaurant group. While they're not chefs or bartenders, their creative opinion is appreciated across nearly all facets of daily operations. And they encourage feedback on their own work from the culinary staff. It is, as Allen calls it, a "democratic creative environment," but they're careful to point out that creativity — for them or the chefs — isn't just a string of wacky ideas. It takes persistence, collaboration, enthusiasm and time. And for them to stay happy in the job, and for the job to stay happy with them, they're constantly pushing themselves.

"Part of Nick's entrepreneurial spirit has ingrained in us to ask, 'What can we build on our own?'" Sarah says.

What they will build on their own remains a question mark. Perhaps a children's book. Or an art gallery. Until then, they're toasting to the curious route with an outrageous cocktail. □

We tried this at home.

I'm no bartender. I'm far more comfortable opening a bottle of wine than shaking a sidecar, if that's even how you make a sidecar. But when writing about *The Aviary Cocktail Book* and its creators, I deemed it my journalistic duty to recreate a cocktail from said book.

For those who know anything about The Aviary in Chicago, little is straightforward, most especially the drinks. They might come served in a treasure chest or a pipe. They might contain curry or chilies or popcorn. And they seem to bend the laws of reality.

Some of the famed Chicago bar's most extraordinary concoctions are served "in the rocks" — funneled into a hollow sphere of ice that a patron would break open with a small slingshot. *Aviary Cocktail* co-author Allen Hemberger '01 assured me that the lemon-sized spheres are easier to fashion than they appear, so my husband and I decided to give them a [bartender pun] shot. One Sunday night we put our infant in her bouncer seat so she could watch as we filled water balloons and prepared an ice bath in a Tupperware container. We poked and prodded the balloons, trying to get them cold before submerging them in cups of icy whiskey.

The whiskey comes with a story. Fighter pilots like my husband, Trent McMullen '12, are known to keep a bottle of Jeremiah Weed, a 90-proof distillation of liquid fire, in their homes for those moments when someone might visit and want a drink. I've been warned that not having a bottle on hand carries consequences.

This particular bottle has occupied prized real estate in our freezer



for four years now, and no one has ever requested a drink because, according to the mouthy former-fighter-pilot band Dos Gringos, it tastes like "something in between Lysol and alcohol and a touch of gasoline."

So when the recipe called for "cheap liquor," I seized the opportunity to use it for our experiment: We needed a lower freezing point, and alcohol provides a colder bath than ice water. When the balloons are dipped into the alcohol, they develop an icy shell. The book says it should firm up in 5 1/2 minutes. Our balloons sat for a few hours. Once they were ready, I carefully sliced the balloons open, revealing ice spheres with water inside. I was giddy . . . until they disintegrated in my hand.

Two crumbled into an icy slush. One had frozen solid. Another cracked down the center in a gaping seam. But two held together, so into each I drilled a small hole through which to drain the water and then inject the cocktail using a syringe that came with my daughter's baby Tylenol.

Per the book's suggestion, we had made a straight-up Old Fashioned, a drink Trent frequently fixes at home, and chilled it on ice. We grabbed a rubber band and a plastic coupler from a cake-decorating kit so he could shoot the cube open à la The Aviary. But the moment we funneled the cold cocktail into the ice sphere as it sat in a highball glass,

the shell began to crack and melt. Trent's point-blank shot made a satisfying "thud," but the ball didn't really crack open. Instead, it slowly dissolved and leaked the drink into the glass. It tasted fine, but the moment lacked the theatrical climax we desired.

Round Two was an attempt at "On a Wire," an autumnal apple-cider drink used to extinguish a burning sprig of rosemary. To make the required graham-cracker syrup, I was able to jury-rig a *sous vide* machine using a pot of steaming water, a wooden spatula and a Ziploc bag. The apple-cider ice cubes were no problem once I gathered all the necessary spices, and the steeping of the cider made our kitchen smell delightfully like fall.

Two days later, once the cubes were frozen and the syrup was chilled, we added them to a cocktail shaker along with cognac and aperitifs and bitters. Then we prepared our glass. We poured a half ounce of slightly warmed brandy into the bottom and set up a sprig of

rosemary with a bent paperclip.

We probably should have heeded the call for a *small* sprig of rosemary, because when we ignited the brandy to toast our moderately sized sprig, the fire ran up the stem like a cartoon TNT fuse into a burst of blue flame and a potent waft of the herb.

Then we followed the instruction to douse the flame with the shaken cocktail, but when the icy mixture hit the blazing brandy, the glass popped and cracked. We stared at the shattered glass with gaping mouths, then at one another, then back at the drink, before breaking into a peal of nervous laughter. An even greater failure on our part. We tried again without the fire, but the drink lost its signature smoky rosemary flavor.

But here's the takeaway: For three days we pushed beyond our normal evening routine to try something new and learned quite a bit in the process. Neither of us had ever tried cognac, which we've learned is distilled white wine. We dug into the differences between Campari and Aperol, read about how bitters are made and discussed the importance of garnishes. In short, the episode reignited our curiosity in the kitchen.

It also reminded us that we, like Allen and his wife and fellow *Aviary Cocktail* contributor Sarah Hemberger '05, like to learn, but we had settled into a rut since having a baby. The experience was a jump-start back into projects we had tabled — if at a slower pace than before.

As for the book, many recipes would stretch rookie bartenders, but several seem achievable. We plan to concoct the Fresno chili margarita and the strawberry-Lapsang souchong Old Fashioned, and believe we can do so with more success.

The book is also a great conversation starter. Guests are constantly perusing it and asking questions about the drinks, the bar and the creators. Most think we're mad for attempting the recipes, and they might be right, but we've had a lot of fun in the process.

— Tara Hunt McMullen '12



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