

Digging in

Tasty morsels about Chicago's food scene

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JANET RAUSA FULLER



Sun-Times Food editor Janet Rausa Fuller is always thinking about her next meal.

LISA DONOVAN



For almost 20 years now, reporter Lisa Donovan has been hitting Chicago's neighborhood markets and restaurants not only for the best grub at the best prices but also as a way to understand the city's melting pot.

JAMES SCALZITTI



As Rhoda Morgenstern would say, food is the first thing Sun-Times Wire Service reporter James Scalzitti remembers liking that liked him back..

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The master mixologist's balls -- rum balls, that is

By [Janet Fuller](#) on December 22, 2009 1:16 PM | [Permalink](#) | [Comments \(0\)](#)

By guest blogger and New York writer [Sean Forbes](#):

When a top-shelf mixologist moves from the cocktail shaker to the mixing bowl, she brings the bar with her.

The proof isn't in the bottle; it's in the balls. (You know these: traditional rum balls made with crushed cookies and booze.)

The rest of us may be brave enough to change liquors or liqueurs, switching rum for whisky or grabbing that almost-empty bottle of coffee or hazelnut liqueur. That's not enough of a change for [Bridget Albert](#).

Albert is the director of mixology for [Southern Wine and Spirits of Illinois](#) and the author of [Market Fresh Mixology](#). She makes candies the way she does cocktails. "It's the way I do everything," Albert says, interrupting herself with laughter.

When creating a new drink, she starts with the base spirit "and then builds the flavors on top of that." She crafts what she terms "spirited balls" the same way: from the bottle out.

There are similarities between the glass and the ball. "It's kind of like a little shot," she notes, "because you're not cooking this, so you do get a little kick from these cookies."

Albert has been making spirited balls, every winter, for years. Not surprisingly, given her creativity in life and behind the bar, she wasn't satisfied with making the same thing every time.

She wanted to have fun and play with flavors, but keep it simple. "I started making variations on a holiday classic, keeping the flavors I would incorporate into a cocktail when making these spirited balls. For instance, Grand Marnier - orange - goes wonderfully with ginger." Out went the vanilla wafers and in came gingersnap crumbs.

What else? "I think chocolate and peanut butter could very well be a divine marriage," Albert says, her eyes bright and her voice happy. She makes dessert cocktails with chocolate and peanut butter liqueurs, and Nutter Butters meet chocolate liqueur in her spirit balls.

Does she have a favorite? "I do," Albert says happily. "My favorite is the rum. It's super easy to make and I love coconut - and I have to tell you, living in the Midwest in December, it is cold and miserable, so any time you can mix rum with coconut, whether you're eating it or drinking it, it takes you back to the islands for just a minute." A mouthful of the tropics. "Absolutely."

What do her friends ask her to make? She gets a lot of requests for the original, because it's familiar -- but, Albert adds, "it's fun to surprise your friends. A big favorite is the Grand Marnier and ginger, because ginger is hot right now to drink, and it's seen as something healthy, so when you can throw it in a cookie - boy, it's a natural hit."

Feel free to be playful when you make these. Albert is. She uses bar tools in the kitchen: a big plastic (easy to clean) muddler for mashing the mixture and a bar spoon for measuring. Don't have a bar spoon? Not a problem. Use a tablespoon instead. Albert's balls aren't only spirited. They're adaptable. Proof -- of a different kind -- is in the recipes that follow.

Bridget Albert's Spirited Balls

- 1 cups vanilla wafer crumbs*
- 1 cup confectioners' sugar
- 2 bar spoons unsweetened cocoa powder
- 1 cup of chopped mixed nuts**
- 2 bar spoons honey, heated
- 1/2 cup bourbon***

Mix all ingredients together gently. Use a spoon or your hand to mix. Put in the fridge for 1 hour to set. Take from fridge and form mixture into balls -- size is up to you. Roll in confectioners' sugar. Put back into fridge overnight (this is best so they set). Or, eat right away.

Variations:

- * 1 cup gingersnap crumbs
- ** Mixed nuts, chopped
- *** Grand Marnier

- * 1 cup Nutter Butter crumbs
- ** Honey-roasted salted peanuts, left whole
- *** Vanilla or chocolate spirit

- * 1 1/2 cups cinnamon graham cracker crumbs
- ** Coconut flakes
- *** Rum

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