



FOOD & DRINK

Jell-O Shots Grow Up

By **Shelby Pope**



Credit: Courtesy Sable

The first time Mike Jones had Jell-O shots, he was in college, drunk and underage at a friend's house. The host made orange and red Jell-O shots; everyone got plastered. The next morning, Jones woke to his friend attacking the floor with scissors, desperate to get the vivid Jell-O stains out of her carpet.

Most people's encounters with Jell-O shots resemble Jones's — it's the kind of drinking you want to forget. Yet in recent years Jell-O shots have appeared on the menus of craft cocktail bars across the country, featuring upscale spirits and sophisticated flavors. At **Sable** in Chicago, where Jones is a bartender, he produces a trio of Jell-O shots in the style of classic cocktails. A mojito? Rum and sugar Jell-O topped with lime and mint foam, sprinkled with a dusting of powdered mint. When Louisville bar **Meta** received their annual allotment of Pappy Van Winkle a few years ago, they gently mocked the Pappy hype by making Old Fashioned Jell-O shots with the bourbon. In New York, all of **The Meatball Shop's** six locations sell \$4 seasonally rotating Jell-O shots. Last year, they sold 30,000 of them (see below for two of their signature recipes)

"Don't you love Jell-O?" asked Daniel Holzman, The Meatball Shop's owner. "Jell-O is one of my favorite desserts. We wanted to tell our customers, 'Hey, we don't take ourselves too seriously, and we want you to have a great time.' "

People have been combining gelatin and booze since at least 1862, when Jerry Thomas included a recipe for jelly punch in **How to Mix Drinks**, America's first cocktail guide. (Don't serve it to ladies, he warned: "Many persons, particularly of the softer sex, have been tempted to partake so plentifully of it as to render them somewhat unfit for waltzing or quadrilling.") No one's exactly sure when the Jell-O shot as we know it today was invented. One legend, according to Gordon Crews in *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Alcohol*, attributes it to musician Tom Lehrer, who mixed orange Jell-O with vodka before a 1955 Navy Christmas party to thwart the party's alcohol ban. "Military police, guards, and senior officers did not think it strange when so many were moving orange Jell-O from one location to another... or even when it was being consumed during 'work hours,' " wrote Crews after interviewing Lehrer.

The treat eventually became synonymous with trashy parties and teen drinking — a 2010 study showed that 21.4% of teens studied had consumed a Jell-O shot within the month. But by the early 2000s, the craft cocktail revival had begun, inspiring bartenders to reinvent lowbrow cocktails and add unusual ingredients like tinctures, aquafaba, and yes, gelatin, to drinks.

Now, fancy Jell-O shots are a way for bars to show their creativity while providing an approachable entry to the world of elaborate cocktails. Plus, they're cheap and not too boozy. "If you do five shots, you get shitcan drunk," said Holzman. "[But] you and your friends can have five Jell-O shots and have a great time."

At Portland's **Interurban**, they make Jell-O shots nodding their hats to cocktails like Satan's Whiskers and the Ramos Gin Fizz (the layered shot incorporates gin, orange blossom water, and cream). Manager Jon Green regularly serves rounds of them to groups. "Grandmas will have Jell-O shots with their kids," Green said. "We've got \$120 an ounce whiskeys, and we're selling \$3 Jell-O shots. It's letting people know that we like to have fun, but you're still getting a good product."

If you want to upgrade the college delicacy into something more adult, start by ditching the store-bought stuff. "Don't use Kool Aid and artificial ingredients," Jones said, recommending powdered gelatin to control your flavors and sugar content. Holzman recommends starting with something simple: "Take a lemonade or juice that you like, and spike it. Or take a classic cocktail and jelly it."

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But most importantly? Have fun, and experiment until you've forgotten the time you puked red, white, and blue Jell-O during that one Fourth of July barbecue. "There really isn't anything that you can't do," said Green. "Jell-O makes everything better." (One caveat worth noting: You may love the idea of a Negroni Jell-O shot, but no one likes bitter Jell-O.)

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Aviation Jell-O Shot [Makes around 30]

Courtesy of The Meatball Shop

- 1.5 cups gin
 - 4 oz Crème de Violette
 - 2 oz Maraschino Liqueur
 - 1.5 cups simple syrup
 - 1 cup lemon juice
 - .5 cups water
 - 12 grams gelatin
1. Combine simple syrup, lemon juice, and water in a saucepan and sprinkle gelatin on top.
 2. Allow gelatin to soak for five minutes or until completely saturated.
 3. Heat over low heat, stirring until gelatin is fully dissolved.
 4. Remove from heat and stir in the gin, Crème de Violette, and Maraschino Liqueur.
 5. Pour into shot glasses, garnish with lemon zest, and refrigerate.

Greyhound Jell-O Shot [Makes around 30]

Courtesy of The Meatball Shop

- 2 cups vodka
 - 1.5 cups grapefruit juice
 - 1 cup simple syrup
 - 13 grams gelatin
1. Combine simple syrup and juices in a saucepan and sprinkle gelatin on top.
 2. Allow the gelatin to soak for five minutes or until completely saturated.
 3. Heat over low heat, stirring constantly until gelatin is fully dissolved.
 4. Remove from heat and stir in the vodka.
 5. Pour into shot glasses and refrigerate.