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The Dallas Morning News

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INNOVATIONS

Margarita machine shook up history

Invented 40 years ago in Dallas, it put Tex-Mex, tequila in the limelight

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WASHINGTON — He may not have created the first margarita, but Mariano Martinez transformed the drink from a border cantina con-

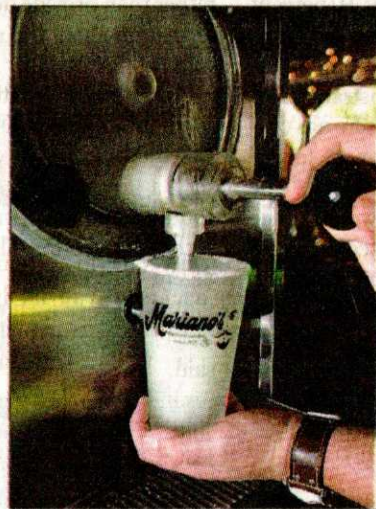
coction to the nation's most popular alcoholic beverage with his invention in Dallas of the frozen margarita machine.

Forty years later, Martinez's invention has increased the U.S. demand for tequila and contributed to the widespread popularity of Tex-Mex cuisine.

It was 1971, and he was a 26-year-old Dallas restaurateur whose dream of operating his own Mexi-

can restaurant was melting before his eyes. Martinez couldn't master the icy consistency of frozen margaritas, much to the dismay of his customers.

With his business on the rocks and facing a coup from his bartenders, who complained the slushy concoctions were too time-consuming and complicated to make, Martinez



Restaurant manager Justin Hill pours a frozen margarita at Mariano's, home of the frozen margarita machine. Owner Mariano Martinez invented the machine 40 years ago.

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Vernon Bryant/Staff Photographer

Margarita machine shook up history

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was desperately searching for a remedy.

"I had a sleepless night and the next day, I stopped to get a cup of coffee at a 7-Eleven and I saw that Slurpee machine," Martinez said. "The entire concept hit me at one time."

An inspired Martinez retrofitted an old soft-serve machine and, using his father's margarita recipe, streamlined the production of what has become America's most ordered alcoholic beverage.

Happy hour would never be the same.

The National Museum of American History, having recognized the invention's cultural significance to Mexican-American food and drink, acquired the machine in 2005.

"It represents a whole movement of American life where all these things came together," said Rayna Green, a curator for the museum. "The margarita machine is also about American innovation



MARIANO MARTINEZ was inspired by 7-Eleven's Slurpee.

"It's really important because for Mexican manufacturers, the margarita becomes the drink that introduces Americans to tequila in a way they weren't able to before."

José Orozco, Whittier College history professor

and entrepreneurship."

The drink was an instant success and attracted people from across the state who wanted to sample Martinez's slushy creation.

"If it hadn't been for that machine, I wouldn't be here today," he said. "That machine allowed me to stay in business for the last 40 years."

The invention saved Martinez's restaurant and also jump-started the U.S. demand for tequila as knock-off machines spread to mom-and-pop and chain restaurants.

As early as the 19th century, tequila manufacturers in Mexico had been trying to sell their blue agave spirit to an American market that knew neither what it was nor how to drink it. That changed when the margarita started appearing in bars and restaurants along the U.S.-Mexico border in the late 1930s.

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duces Americans to tequila in a way they weren't able to before," said José Orozco, a Whittier College history professor.

The popularity of the drink only increased with the introduction of the frozen margarita machine, which produced a consistent beverage. It became so popular that in 2006, the margarita surpassed the martini as the most ordered alcoholic beverage, representing 17 percent of all mixed-drink sales, says Brown-Forman, one of the largest American-owned spirits and wine companies.

Americans drink an average of 185,000 margaritas every hour, Brown-Forman says.

Restaurant owners soon realized that the perfect pair for the margaritas they were pouring was Mexican-inspired foods such as nachos and tacos. So as the frozen margarita spread across the U.S., it brought Tex-Mex cuisine with it.

Tex-Mex "basically floated out of the Southwest on a sea of margaritas and Coronas," said Jeffrey Pilcher, a history professor at the University of Minnesota.

Over time, America's taste for tequila has become more refined; demand for top-shelf tequila has reached an all-time high. The biggest boom is in the super-premium category, which has seen imports increase 336 percent since 2002, according to the Distilled Spirits Council of the United States.

"We are past the days of slamming down tequila," Martinez said. "We are in an era of 100 percent agave tequila."

Tequila has transformed from the liquor of peasants to a present fit for the Duke of Cambridge. Recently, a guest who attended the royal wedding of William and Catherine brought bottles of Tequila Avión, top-shelf tequila not sold in England.

And as the tastes of consumers change, so does the margarita menu at Mariano's Hacienda. Names like Fire and Ice, the Texas Tornado and Burnt Orange now grace the menu.

But don't worry: Martinez's original frozen margarita inspired by his father's secret recipe is still on tap behind the bar.