

Eric Celeste: Dallas in a glass

The Smithsonian has recognized the magic of the frozen margarita. But we were already quite aware of that

08:01 AM CDT on Sunday, October 23, 2005

A quick, touching tale: Years ago, a close friend of mine met a beautiful young woman for a weekday lunch at Snuffer's on Lower Greenville. My friend was smitten with this acquaintance, but she had kindly told him several times that, although she valued his company, she harbored no amorous feelings toward him.

During this lunch, they consumed one basket of cheddar fries (loaded), two cheddar burgers (medium rare) and six giant frozen margaritas. Two hours later, they fell madly, deeply for one another, proving once again that true love can bloom anywhere, even in a midday cab ride home.

I relate this sweet story to make the following point: If we are to believe the psycho-socio-emotional equation that "A Beautiful Thing = Love," and if the above illustration (controlling for cheddar, beef patties and french fries) suggests that "Love = Frozen Margaritas"), then the transitive property of equality concludes that "Frozen Margaritas = A Beautiful Thing."

I don't really need to spell this out for you. If you live in Dallas, you know it to be true. You realize the frozen margarita is omnipresent, on the menu of every serious Tex-Mex restaurant in town and swaying from the hand of every unattainable happy hour young lass you see.

Then why make this assertion if no one is going to argue it? To set up an even grander claim. For if my anthropological study of Dallas nightlife for the past 18 years has yielded one important finding, it's that the frozen margarita is not only beautiful, it is *essential*, at least in Dallas. This wondrous pale green libation – invented here, perfected here – gives breath to our nightlife, offers protection from the hellish North Texas sun and, in the protective shade of a street-side patio, makes this city and its people seem, of all things, *desirable*. All considered, it is magic.

I'm not the only one who thinks so. Spirits expert Gary Regan, author of *The Bartender's Bible*, declares the margarita "a wonderful creation." The inventor of the frozen, Slurpee-style concoction, restaurateur Mariano Martinez, told me many years ago (as we sat in his former Old Town location and quaffed the icy delight) that its appeal is hard to define. He was just trying to find a way to save his business when

he invented the machine in 1971 and began serving from it a year later. Still, he said, he knew instantly he had a classic on his hands and in his mugs.

It wasn't just that the drink was unique in a city that falls too hard for every new nightlife trend. The frozen margarita was the essence of Dallas at that place (The Village, *the* young 'n' single hotspot) and time (the swinging '70s). It was the perfect bridge between Dallasites embracing both the era's free-flowing sexuality and the area's burgeoning food trend, Tex-Mex.

It's the drink's cultural importance that interested the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History, which recently acquired the soft-serve machine Mr. Martinez rigged so he could sell the first few frozen rounds. As the museum's curator told this paper, "To us, it's a story about American innovation and entrepreneurial spirit."

To me, it's the story of this drink's supernatural essence and deep intertwinement with the city it calls home. It has so many special attributes, it is easily considered Dallas' perfect summer cocktail.

Consider the following: Unlike other well-known drinks, it never goes out of style. (When's the last time you ordered a Manhattan?) What other adult beverage can you pour into a pitcher, set it outside here in July, and *still* be enjoying cold a half-hour later from that same container? Your pitcher of Sangria, my friend, is warm and watery, while my perfect frozen blend of tequila, orange liqueur and lime juice mocks the Dallas heat.

More important, what other drink can be ordered by the most manly of men and the comeliest of women? A cosmopolitan? A bourbon rocks? Sorry, doesn't work. No matter your bar of choice, in this city the frozen 'rita is truly egalitarian, ordered by man or woman, brown or black or white, whether they're covered in denim or draped in finery.

It's a drink that is at once universal and local, proof again of its mystical, elastic charm. It's the one thing that makes me long for summer. It's the brainfreeze for which I gladly pay \$7 a pop. It's the sinful joy I imbibed one too many times exactly 270 days before my daughter was born. It's the squishy elixir that renders this city livable when I've had enough of it. It's love and magic and Dallas in a glass, and who doesn't want to suck down some of that?

Eric Celeste is editor of Southwest Airlines' Spirit magazine. He likes his with salt. You may e-mail him at eric.celeste@gmail.com.