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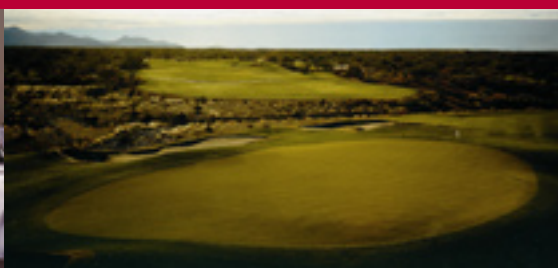
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TOAST OF THE TOWN

YOU CAN THANK MARIANO MARTINEZ EVERY TIME YOU DRINK A FROZEN MARGARITA



BY: PAULA FELPS
PHOTOGRAPHY: ADAM HICKS



MARIANO MARTINEZ always knew he was bound for success; it just took him a few years to figure out where to find it.

“I always knew that I wanted to be somebody, no matter what I did,” says Martinez. “I tried a lot of things because I didn’t know what I wanted to do.”

Ironically, his success came when he returned to something that he had tried hard to escape. Growing up in East Dallas, his father managed an El Chico restaurant and young Mariano started bussing tables by the age of 9. When he discovered that the change left on the tables belonged to the waiters, not to the busboy, he quickly set his sights on waiting tables. But it would be another three years before his father finally let him begin taking customers’

orders. In the meantime, he saved his money and bought his first set of wheels – an All-State 175cc motorcycle from Sears.

Just one year later, he was driving that motorcycle from his home in East Dallas to driver’s education classes at Greenhill Academy in Addison. At the time, driver’s education was something new; the course he enrolled in was a test program. When he learned that there was a one-year waiting list, 13-year-old Martinez, who was too young for the program, placed his name on the list and then called regularly to see if his position had changed.

“The lady who answered the phone got to know me, so she called me one day and said they’d had a last-minute



cancellation. She asked if I could be there the next day, and I was.”

He wasn’t yet old enough to qualify for a driver’s license, but the driver’s ed classes were so new that he “slipped under the radar” and was able to take his driving test. In 1958, at the age of 14, he got his dad to sign the paperwork for his first car – a brand new bright red Triumph TR3.

“I lived in that car,” he recalls fondly. “I couldn’t even tell you how many miles I put on it. I wanted a Corvette, but I needed something I could afford payments on.”

Martinez gravitated toward older friends, and by the age of 16, he was already beginning to think like an entrepreneur. Realizing that the Triumph was too flashy for a serious businessman, he sold it and bought a much more sedate tan Chevrolet Bel Air. The brand-new car was his attempt to be taken seriously, but when he joined a rock ‘n’ roll band a couple of years later, the Bel Air was quickly retired.

CARS AND GUITARS

In the early 1960s, one of the hottest tickets in Dallas was The Nightcaps, a local band that meshed blues, rockabilly and rock ‘n’ roll into a seamless crowd-pleasing package. The group’s only album, “Wine, Wine, Wine” was recorded in 1961 and found huge regional success, selling more than 10,000 copies and yielding a couple of hit singles.

When Martinez became The Nightcaps’ bass player, he found instant success and was getting paid for one night’s work what his father earned in an entire week.

“At the time, I had aspirations of becoming the next Trini Lopez,” he says, referencing the Dallas singer who found instant success in 1963 with his smash hit, “If I Had a Hammer.” Martinez knew Lopez and was close friends with Trini’s younger brother, Jesse. Being so close to a dream that had come true for Trini

made Martinez more confident about his own future. He dropped out of high school and worked full-time, putting in several hours a week at his parent’s restaurant and then playing in The Nightcaps on the weekends.

“When I joined The Nightcaps, we were more popular locally than Trini,” he says. “I was making really good money.”

The new lifestyle, of course, did not fit with his somber tan Bel-Air. He sold the Chevrolet and bought a brand-new Buick Wildcat, which is best remembered as Buick’s first performance car. The emerald green convertible turned heads everywhere Martinez went, and today he chuckles as he recalls the luxury sports coupe. It’s hard to say whether the car or the musician first caught the eye of a young girl named Wanda Wade, whom he began dating. Wanda has been married to Mariano for 32 years now, and those who knew the couple back then still talk about his Wildcat.

“We have some friends who were Wanda’s neighbors when we were dating, and they still talk about that bright green car coming down the street to pick her up,” he says. “They joke about how it always looked like it had just been washed, which is how I’ve always kept my cars.”

Martinez figured his path was set; he’d be a successful musician and now he had the beautiful girl as well. However, those plans came screeching to a halt one night between sets. During his break, he approached the bar to get a drink and, finding it too crowded, wandered into an adjacent lounge, where a jazz trio was playing.

“I was about 20, and they were a lot older,” he recalls. “They were pretty good. So I sat and talked with them when they went on break. They were all chain smoking and drinking scotch straight up; they were wearing these tuxedos that looked like they had been worn and dry cleaned too many times.”

Then they told Martinez that they earned about \$15 a night, which was standard pay. At the time, Martinez was earning \$200 a night with The Nightcaps.

“It scared me. I saw my future, and I didn’t like it. I realized that I didn’t have what it takes to make it big in the music business, and I could end up being a \$15-a-night chain smoking alcoholic sideman.”

Around the same time, he had met Lee Trevino, a rising golf star who worked at a golf course Martinez frequented. He briefly switched his attention to golf.

“I wanted to be Lee,” he says. “Then I watched and saw how good he played, and I knew I didn’t have what it takes. I wanted to be a singer like Trini Lopez or a golfer like Lee Trevino, but unfortunately, I played



golf like Trini Lopez and sang like Lee Trevino.”

The wake-up call sent Martinez back to the books, and at the age of 21 he earned his high school general equivalency degree and enrolled at



then-North Texas State University. After one semester, he enrolled in the inaugural class of the new El Centro College, where he earned a two-year business degree and went back to the thing he knew best – the restaurant industry.

RAISING A GLASS TO SUCCESS

In the early ‘70s, the restaurant business was completely different than it is today.

“You didn’t have celebrity chefs; it was very blue collar,” Martinez says. “I was trying to think of what I could do differently.”

In 1971, with \$500 and a SBA loan, he opened Mariano’s Restaurant and Cantina, the most expensive Mexican restaurant in the Southwest. The restaurant took a unique approach, offering live entertainment and a full bar. Unable to afford advertising, he threw a press party and, for his promotional photo, rented a “bandito” outfit.

“The *Dallas Morning News* and *Dallas Times Herald* both ran [the photo], and people went crazy. I started getting all kinds of invitations, like from the Mexican Consulate, the Dallas Cowboys wives, Taste of Dallas, the Junior League – everyone wanted the bandito to come to their parties.”

The restaurant was an immediate success, and Martinez, who by then had traded in his flashy Wildcat for a Chevy station wagon, knew he needed a car that would help draw attention to the restaurant. He bought his first collectible car, a white 1954 Mercedes Benz 220A Cabriolet convertible.

“It was perfect for functions, because everyone noticed that car,” he says. “I wanted to get a vanity plate with the restaurant’s name, but it was too long.”

Instead, a friend made a customized airbrushed license plate that he substituted for the front plate. It was an effective marketing tool, since the car was valet-parked in a prominent spot everywhere he went.



Mariano’s Restaurant and Cantina was a success beyond his wildest dreams, but his biggest accomplishment was yet to come. Like every other Mexican restaurant, Mariano’s was challenged by a way to make consistently good frozen margaritas. They weren’t very time-efficient, as they had to be made-to-order in a blender or else they would lose their consistency.

During a stop at 7-Eleven one day, the Slurpee machine caught his eye and a light bulb went on in Martinez’s head.

“I bought a soft-serve ice cream machine and souped it up, just like you would a car,” Martinez says. “I kept experimenting and tasting, and once we got it right, we put it in the restaurant.”

To call the first frozen margarita machine an overnight success is an understatement. Imitators rushed to follow while patrons rushed to Mariano’s for refills. In October of 2005, the Smithsonian American History Museum added the original machine, which had been retired and replaced by updated models, to its collection.

The combination of upscale Mexican food and frozen margaritas was a profitable one; today Martinez owns two Mariano’s locations and four La Hacienda Ranch restaurants. Those restaurants have paved the way for him to indulge his passion for cars.

After adding a brand-new 1973 Mercedes 450 SLC to his stable, he turned his attention to classic cars, including a 1947 Chrysler Town and Country Woody, a 1948 Jaguar with P100 headlights and, later, a Mercedes 280 convertible.

“Eventually, the upkeep and the time I was spending on my cars was just too much, so I had to switch to just the new cars,” he says. “Since then, I’ve had a ton of Mercedes, and Wanda drives the E55 AMG.”

But he strayed from that loyalty recently, buying a 2005 Bentley GT.

“When I read there was a two-year waiting list, I had to have one,” he says.

Mariano and Wanda have a second home in Pebble Beach, where a Porsche 911 waits in the garage.

“The weather there is so nice, and we go to Carmel a lot,” he says. “The first thing I do when we get there is fire up the Porsche and head to the Monterey Peninsula Country Club.”

Where, presumably, he enjoys a frozen margarita. ☺

Above: Mariano Martinez pours a drink from his invention, the frozen margarita machine, circa 1971. The original machine now is in the Smithsonian. Photo courtesy of the Smithsonian Institution.

Above: Mariano Martinez’s success now includes two Mariano’s restaurants and four La Hacienda Ranch Locations.