

# Margarita machine makes way to Smithsonian

10:55 AM CDT on Monday, October 10, 2005

By COLLEEN McCAIN NELSON / The Dallas Morning News

They're pieces of Americana that changed the country: Eli Whitney's cotton gin, the Wright Brothers' plane, Ford's Model T ... and the frozen-margarita machine.



**AP** Associated Press

KYE R. LEE/DMN

These days, Mariano Hacienda owner Mariano Martinez uses new margarita machines in his Dallas restaurant. But their ancestor, a soft-serve ice cream machine, has a place in his heart - and in the Smithsonian's American history museum.

Dallas restaurateur Mariano Martinez may not have revolutionized the cotton industry, and he wasn't the first to fly. But the souped-up soft-serve ice cream machine that he first used to mass-produce frozen margaritas has found its place in history.

The Smithsonian's National Museum of American History recently acquired the 34-year-old machine, adding it to a collection that includes cultural markers ranging from the original Star-Spangled Banner to Tupperware wonder bowls.

"I have a pretty fertile imagination. I have big dreams," Mr. Martinez said.

"But this is beyond what I ever imagined."

It was an idea inspired by a 7-Eleven Slurpee machine and executed by a young restaurant owner trying to stay afloat.

As a result, margaritas and Tex-Mex cuisine emerged as an essential part of American culture, Smithsonian officials said.

"To us, it's a story about American innovation and entrepreneurial spirit," said Rayna Green, curator of the National Museum of American History. "And it coincides with the very interesting story of Tex-Mex becoming a phenomenon."

In 1971, Mr. Martinez had no designs on becoming an inventor or an icon. He was trying to run a restaurant.

Mr. Martinez had grown up around his father's eatery, El Charo. Tequila was tough to come by then, he said, and the margarita was an exotic drink that most people consumed only on vacations in Mexico.

But the elder Mr. Martinez occasionally would make the frozen drink in a blender for his patrons. When his son opened his own restaurant, he knew that frozen margaritas would help his establishment stand out.

The harried bartenders at Mariano's couldn't squeeze enough limes or blend the drinks fast enough to keep up with demand, though. Customers complained - the signature drink was inconsistent, and it wasn't even cold.

"I saw my dream evaporating," Mr. Martinez said. "This was my one shot at being somebody."

A pit stop at a 7-Eleven proved inspiring. Mr. Martinez spotted a Slurpee machine and knew he'd found the answer. He acquired a soft-serve ice cream machine and started mixing.

"The challenge was to make each drink taste like a blender margarita," he said. "We kept experimenting - and tasting."

Once Mr. Martinez hit upon the right recipe - sugar was the secret ingredient, he said - he moved the machine to the bar.

"It became an instant success," he said. "We didn't have to sell it."

Mr. Martinez never got a patent for his margarita machine, so copycats quickly surfaced. Soon, other bars and restaurants were pouring frozen margaritas, and a few claimed to have acquired "Mariano's secret recipe."

"I never dreamed that I invented anything," Mr. Martinez said. "To me, it was just a way of producing consistent, quality, cold margaritas."

But Dr. Green of the Smithsonian said there's no doubt where the credit belongs. Museum officials spent more than a year researching the history of the frozen margarita and verifying its origins.

"It's a really good story about the rise of a young, smart businessman who made this incredible choice at the right time," she said. "No, it's not the Model T, but we have lots of things in the museum that are little innovations that became important."

For now, the margarita machine sits in storage at the Smithsonian. But Dr. Green, a former Dallas resident and a devoted fan of Tex-Mex, said she is hopeful that it will be shown in a future exhibit.

At Mariano's Hacienda in northeast Dallas, the restaurant seems a bit empty without the original machine. A news release from the Smithsonian now hangs where Mr. Martinez's invention resided until last month.

At the bar, the frozen concoction made famous by Mr. Martinez flows out of four shiny machines.

"Probably about 70 percent of the drinks I serve are frozen margaritas," said Juan Sotelo, the head bartender.

Customers Carolyn and Earl Bullock of Murphy said the famous cocktail has kept them coming back to Mariano's for years. In fact, they might make a stop at the Smithsonian during a trip to Washington, D.C., in February.

"We'll go to see [the machine] if they're serving," Mr. Bullock said.

Mr. Martinez, 61, still keeps a tight rein on the margarita recipe at his restaurants, tinkering with the ingredients and ensuring that his establishments aren't skimping. As he sipped a top-shelf margarita at Mariano's last week, he lamented the fact that others don't adhere to the same standards.

"A lot of bars and restaurants have exploited the margarita machine. They use cheap tequila and not much of it," he said. "It's really unfortunate that a lot of people have that image. They see me and think, 'He invented that cheap drink.' "

But the Smithsonian has brought redemption and the sense that being defined by a frozen drink isn't such a bad thing.

"It changed our culture, and it helped promote the popularity of Tex-Mex," Mr. Martinez.

But when the day arrived two weeks ago, and it was time for the soft-serve-ice-cream-server-turned-margarita-maker to be packed up and sent off to Washington, Mr. Martinez was nowhere to be found.

"I kind of didn't want to be there and watch it go out of the building," he said. "But I know she's in a better place."

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