

# Smithsonian limelight for margarita machine

## LOCAL MAN'S IDEA FINDS IMMORTALITY

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Mariano Martinez was buying coffee at a 7-Eleven store one day when he had a brilliant idea.

But then, lots of us have brilliant ideas at 7-Eleven stores. Suddenly it's revealed to us that we really, really need some chips, or a candy bar, or a giant Coke or — duh! — all three!

Well, that day, more than 30 years ago, it was revealed to Martinez that he really, really needed a Slurpee.

Or, more precisely, a Slurpee-making machine.

"A light bulb lit up," the part-time Pebble Beach resident said Friday.

This wasn't about wanting a 24/7 supply of slushy cold drinks.

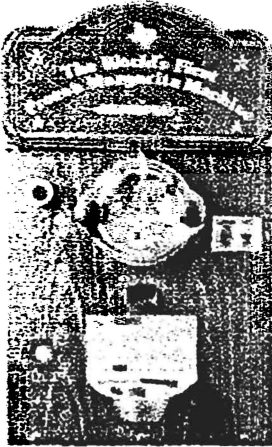
No, Martinez had just invented the frozen-margarita machine. (Or just about, anyway.)

The rest is history. Officially.

As of this month, his machine is housed in the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History in Washington.

But the Smithsonian was the last thing on Martinez's mind in the spring of 1971. He'd just opened a restaurant in Dallas — on \$500 and a loan from the Small Business Administration — and he was serving margaritas.

Which was not the thing to do at the time.



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"Go back to '71," he said. "They were not that popular."

But Martinez's margaritas were made from his father's secret recipe.

"And the bartenders could not keep up with the demand."

That sounds like a good thing, but it turned out to be a bad thing.

Margaritas are hard to make, and the bartenders threatened to quit.

"They wanted to go back to where people just ordered Scotch," Martinez said.

The customers weren't happy either. Sometimes their drinks were fantastic. But sometimes they weren't. Sometimes they weren't even cold. And that wasn't cool.

So Martinez was a worried man when he walked into the 7-Eleven that fateful day. But when he walked out, his problems were solved.

Or they would have been. Except the 7-Eleven company refused to sell him a Slurpee machine.

So he bought a soft-serve ice cream machine instead. And he and a friend tinkered and tinkered and "souped it up."

A week or so later, "We were pumping out frozen margaritas. ... And what could be colder than frozen?"

Martinez did make one small mistake.

"I didn't even think about a patent," he said. Meaning he didn't cash in big-time when the big-bucks frozen-margarita market took off.

Still, he's not wastin' away in Margaritaville, either.

After all, he now owns a house in Pebble Beach. Not to mention six restaurants in

Dallas, which serve 1.2 million people a year — the equivalent of the city's entire population. And those people buy untold numbers of Martinez's signature drink.

In fact, Martinez now said his deepest regret about his invention may have nothing to do with how deep his pockets came to be, but with "how margarita machines have been exploited. Some bars and restaurants use inexpensive tequila and not much of it."

At a fiesta at the Carmel Mission last year, he actually heard someone refer to her margarita as "Oh, you know, one of those machine ones."

"That just really crushed me," Martinez said.

Having his machine in the Smithsonian makes up for a lot, of course.

But it was hard to see it go. In fact, he didn't see it go.

"I purposely planned on not being there," Martinez said. "It's like losing a part of me."

And no wonder. He relied on the machine, night in and night out, for 20 years before he retired it and went with the new high-powered, high-tech kind. But even then he kept the original on display at the front of the restaurant where it made its debut.

Then the Smithsonian got interested. When his 23-year-old nephew heard about that, he had another idea: He thought his uncle should sell the machine on eBay.

"But I'd much rather have it in the Smithsonian than have a whole pile of money," Martinez said. "How many inventions end up in the Smithsonian?"

According to a spokesman at the museum, one invention that didn't end up there is the original Slurpee machine.

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