

**T**HE COARSE SALT ON THE RIM OF THE COCKTAIL glass primes my tongue for an avalanche of tequila snowcone. I am drinking frozen margaritas at Mariano's Mexican Cuisine in Dallas. And on a brutally hot summer afternoon, a big mouthful of this adult Slurpee cools down the cranium like nothing else.

The frozen margaritas here are served in chunky, thick-stemmed glasses that remind me of beer schooners. The menu offers lots of top-shelf margarita alternatives, but I have ordered one of Mariano's original frozen margaritas. The tequila is really little more than a background flavor. The salt of the rim and the sweet and sour of the drink mix are far more pronounced than the liquor—which makes the drink very popular with college kids and other imbibers on training wheels.

Mariano Martinez, the restaurant's owner and the man who made frozen margaritas famous, joins me in the corner booth. Over several of the icy cocktails, he repeats a saga he has told many times before: the story of how he revolutionized the frozen margarita.

"When my father [Mariano Martinez Sr.] opened his restaurant, El Charro, in the 1950s, you couldn't sell liquor by the drink in Texas restaurants. But he made frozen margaritas for people who brought their own tequila. So when I opened this restaurant in 1971, people came to me for margaritas too," says Martinez. "Dad gave me his recipe—it was tequila, lime juice, and orange liqueur. His secret ingredient was a splash of simple syrup. You put it in the blender with ice until it got slushy."

The Texas legislature passed the "liquor by the drink" amendment in 1970. Beer and wine were already available in restaurants in "wet" counties, but local option elections were to determine whether restaurants could serve cocktails. In 1971, Dallas voted yes.

Selling cocktails was enormously profitable, and Martinez struggled to make Mariano's Mexican Restaurant *the* place for frozen margaritas. "I taught my bartender how to make the drink, but people complained about it. They said it tasted different every time. I tried to talk to the bartender about it one night, but he was sick of squeezing all those limes and threatened to quit," remembers Martinez.

"The next morning I was getting coffee at the 7-Eleven and saw some kids getting Slurpees out of the machine," he says. "That's when it hit me." Southland Corporation, the parent of 7-Eleven, wasn't eager to help Martinez purchase frozen drink machines, so he ended up buying a soft-serve ice cream machine. "We tinkered with the machine and the recipe for a long time," he says with a laugh. "We had a lot of tasting parties. We only had one machine, and it would run out every night."

When you make a frozen margarita in a blender, you dilute the drink with added ice, he explains. But if you put the same ingredients in an ice cream machine they won't freeze because the alcohol content is too high. First he experimented with diluting the solution with enough water to allow it to freeze. But the resulting cocktail tasted too weak. The solution, Martinez tells me triumphantly, was to increase the sugar. With a high enough brix level (the scientific measurement of sugar content), you can freeze quite a bit of alcohol.

The frozen margaritas at Mariano's Mexican Cuisine became an instant sensation. The

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Dallas Cowboys started coming by at happy hour; Trini Lopez and Lee Trevino hung out there. But it was students from nearby Southern Methodist University who really spread the drink's fame. Within a decade, frozen margarita machines were blanketing the state in new-fallen slush.

Texas "Mexican" restaurants were struggling with the authenticity problem in the 1970s. Those deemed to serve old-fashioned "Tex-Mex" began to lose ground to those that claimed to have "interior Mexican" menus. A reputation for good, cheap frozen margaritas saved many old Tex-Mex institutions. And the unbeatable combination of fajitas and frozen margaritas launched a Tex-Mex comeback in the late 1970s and early 1980s.

Mariano Martinez never received a patent or trademark for his idea. He doesn't think it would have been possible anyway. "I just started making margaritas in a machine that

already existed," he says with a shrug. Luckily, his margarita bucket was a financial success. The invention is still found in liquor and grocery stores. Pouches contain all the ingredients you need to make a margarita, except the tequila. You mix them up in the plastic bucket and put it in your freezer, then you scoop out frozen margaritas with an ice cream scoop.

"Every coed at SMU had a margarita bucket in the freezer," giggles a friend who attended the college in the early 1980s.

"I go places now and I tell people I invented the frozen margarita, and they say, 'Yeah, right,'" says Martinez.

As for the debate about who invented the original margarita, Martinez doesn't much care. The original drink was never all that popular anyway, he points out. The popularity of the frozen cocktail sparked the revival of its predecessor. The original shaken margarita owes its popularity to . . . the Slurpee machine.

Regardless of who invented it, there's no argument that the margarita changed the Tex-Mex restaurant business. Restaurants built from the 1940s through the 1960s didn't even have bars. From the 1970s on, the bar became the center of every Tex-Mex restaurant. In a state where temperatures can exceed ninety degrees six months out of the year, the frozen margarita became an enormous draw. Tex-Mex restaurants have lured customers with bigger, better, and stronger margaritas ever since.

Along with the new focus on the bar came a different attitude about dining. Whereas customers had once come to eat and quickly departed, now the Tex-Mex restaurant became a hangout. Cocktail-friendly foods, like chips and salsa, with accompaniments such as chile con queso and guacamole, soared in popularity as happy hour appetizers turned into a drinking man's dinner.

Eventually, postmodern cantinas like Xalapeño Charlie's and La Zona Rosa in Austin combined Tex-Mex food and Tex-Mex cocktails with live music. After all, where else would you want to listen to Tex-Mex tunes?