

THE FIRST FROZEN • margarita

BY JAIMIE SIEGLE

Few people drank margaritas in 1971. Unless they had traveled to Mexico, people had rarely even heard of tequila. Then Mariano's Mexican Cantina opened its doors on Dallas' fashionable Greenville Avenue and created a trend that changed American drinking forever.

Armed with years of restaurant experience and his father's secret margarita recipe, Mariano Martinez opened Mariano's Restaurant in Dallas' Old Town shopping center and created an experience of mariachi bands, costumed waiters and ornate Mexican murals. The festive atmosphere encouraged customers to order Mariano's specialty margaritas ... and that's exactly what they did, leaving bartenders swamped and causing traffic jams at the blender. When hurried bartenders began to serve up inconsistent batches of margaritas, customers began to complain. Martinez racked his brain to find a solution that would allow the bartenders to mass-produce his father's impeccable recipe.

He found his answer in a washed-up, soft-serve ice cream machine. Once modified, this machine could produce the large—and consistent—batches that he needed to maintain quality. Some told Mariano that the “frozen margarita” concept was impossible, since alcohol doesn't freeze. Other restaurant owners told him that drinks from a machine would never sell; customers wanted the romance of the bartender mixing and pouring their cocktails. But Martinez had seen the margarita's potential since he watched his dad make them so many years ago. “I always knew there was magic in the drink,” he says.

The young restaurateur's machine-made margaritas sold for \$1.25 in 6-ounce, short-stemmed glasses, and customers from all over flocked to Mariano's for the adult slushie. Soon the

“souped-up” contraption became a phenomenon. And in 2005, The Smithsonian's National Museum of American History acquired the original drink machine, citing it as a symbol of “American invention and entrepreneurialism.” After months of investigating U.S. patent records and competing claims, Dallas native Rayna Green—curator for the Smithsonian—and a team of historians confirmed that Mariano's machine was indeed the first. It is this machine that is responsible for popularizing margaritas and Tex-Mex food in the United States. “It replaced the martini in American drinking,” Green says.

Four years after its induction into the museum, the Smithsonian still receives inquiries and press about the iconic machine. “Obviously, there are a lot of margarita lovers out there,” Green says. Martinez knows this all too well, which is why he now serves seven flavors of margaritas and stocks his six restaurants with over 40 types of tequila daily. And the drink of choice for the founding father himself? “Papa's Original Recipe,” Martinez says confidently.

Today Mariano's Hacienda has traded in its trendy, upscale vibe for a fun, family atmosphere. It may lack the glitz and glamour of its '70s glory days, but Mariano's has retained its high-quality standards, loyal clientele and museum-worthy drink recipe for almost 40 years. Now, there's a reason to raise your (margarita) glass.

© SHUTTERSTOCK.COM

