

THE COARSE SALT ON THE RIM OF THE COCK-
tail 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