



# Arizona Beverage Analyst

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## ARIZONA BEVERAGE ANALYST

### The Irrepressible Margarita — America's Most Profitable Cocktail

by Robert Plotkin

The Margarita has enjoyed far more than its allotted fifteen minutes of fame. In fact, after climbing into the limelight in the 1970s, the drink has continually ranked among the most frequently requested cocktails in America. However, relying solely on its popularity to keep your coffers full won't cut it. It's too prevalent of a cocktail to serve your guests the same thing your competitors do. Fortunately, Señorita Margarita is an upwardly mobile libation that's highly adaptable and potentially one of the most profit-laden cocktails in your repertoire.

There are four essential truths about Margaritas that should be considered inviolate. The first of these is that the cocktail is built on a foundation of lime juice — not lemon, as is often the case — which means that using lemon-based sweet 'n' sour is a mistake. Lime-based sour mix is concocted largely the same way as a lemon juice sweet 'n' sour. If trapped behind the bar with nothing but a bottle of conventional sweet 'n' sour, add about 3/4 ounce of fresh lime juice (roughly 3-4 lime wedges) to the drink before shaking. The result will be a balanced mix upon which to build the cocktail, one with a lime-forward character.

The second immutable truth about Margaritas is the better the tequila, the better the resulting cocktail. Committing a top-shelf brand in a Margarita isn't sacrilege, it's an act of genius. The recipe you choose though needs to adequately showcase the tequila or the tactic may backfire. Keep the number of other ingredients to a minimum to avoid obscuring its enhanced quality and character. Also consider serving the masterpiece straight up as a cocktail for the same reason.

Not only do premium brands result in better tasting drinks, they also deliver greater profits. Although higher in cost, a top-shelf tequila commands a higher price and yields a healthier margin than its lesser counterparts.

The third involves attaining balance and

the concept of sessionability. The cocktail basically combines four elements — the sour mix, sweetener, the taste of the tequila and the flavor of the orange modifier — each of which need be perceived on the palate equally. Stray too far toward any one extreme and you're headed for trouble. Guests are less likely to order another if the drink is too sweet, too tart or too potent.

The last Margarita-related commandment that the cocktail needs to be shaken vigorously — anything less is problematic. The purpose behind shaking the drink is four-fold. It thoroughly integrates the ingredients, properly chills the drink, introduces a modicum of water into the mix and aerates the cocktail. The enhanced production value of energetically shaking the cocktail alone makes the effort worthwhile.

#### Crafting Money-making Margaritas

The Margarita knows no creative boundaries. It's versatile and can adopt an impressive array of flavors. At the risk of stripping the creative process of its mystery, there is a formula to engineering a gourmet, high performance Margarita. It involves tweaking one or more of the following variables.

• **CASTING A TEQUILA** — Not all tequilas are created equally, which makes the decision of which brand to feature exceedingly important. Unaged blanco (plata or silver) tequilas are often relied on, not because of their relatively lower cost, but because they add vitality to the Margarita that aged, more reserved tequilas doesn't quite manage.

Reposado tequilas are barrel-aged a minimum of 2 months, although most remain in oak 4 to 8 months. They're matured just long enough to soften their character. The bestselling style of tequila in Mexico, reposado tequila strike a true balance between the fresh, spirited character of a blanco and the mellow refinement of an añejo.

Añejo tequilas are aged no less than a year. They're characteristically aromatic with well-rounded flavors and lingering finishes. The elder statesmen are called extra añejos,

a designation indicating the tequila was barrel-aged for 3 years or longer.

• **A SPLIT DECISION** — Where's it written that you can only use one style or brand of tequila in a signature Margarita? The objective behind pairing two or more complementary styles of tequila is to give the drink more character and add a dash of theatrical pizzazz. For example, the THREE AMIGOS MARGARITA is crafted using equal parts of blanco and reposado tequilas and then finished with a generous float of an añejo. Each contributes greatly to the cocktail's flavor and alluring presentation.

Philip Raimondo, master mixologist for Beam Global, has taken the practice one step farther. "I'm rather partial to blending together the Margarita and its soul mate, the Sidecar. I use Hornitos Reposado, Courvoisier Exclusif and triple sec, and then fresh squeeze a lime, lemon and orange wedge. I add agave nectar, a little extra lime juice and shake the drink until frost forms on the mixing tin. Strain the drink into a chilled cocktail glass rimmed with salt and serve to a round of applause."

• **INFUSED AND PEPPERED** — A creative, money-making option is featuring an infused-tequila in your specialty. Today mixologists are infusing tequila with everything from kiwis, melons and pineapples to ginger, red peppers and sun-dried tomatoes. It's a straightforward and uncomplicated process involving steeping the spirit in large, airtight containers. Several days later, the tequila will have adopted an entirely new persona with loads of appeal.

Another viable option is simply reaching for a peppered tequila, such as Tanteo or Agave Loco. Each has been infused with the essential oils of indigenous peppers and surgically balanced so as not to scorch the larynx.

• **THE TRIPLE PLAY** — Triple sec and blue Curaçao are not your only options when it comes to orange modifiers. When preparing a super-premium Margarita, pair the top-shelf tequila with something equally brilliant, such as Cointreau, Patrón Citrónge or recent arrival Combier Liqueur de Orange.

Modifying with Grand Marnier imbues a Margarita with both the flavor of brandy and sweet, succulent oranges. Other liqueurs in this class include Italian Gran Gala and Extase XO from France.

• **SCRATCH MIX ARTISTRY** — The underlying foundation of the Margarita and source of the cocktail's vibrancy is the base sour mix. It also helps distinguish your Margarita from those being marketed at the cocktail lounge down the street. Most scratch recipes call for 3 parts lime juice to 1



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part of simple syrup (3:1). If the resulting mix is deemed too tart, shift the proportions closer toward 2:1.

It should be noted that many a great fresh lime sour mix has been crafted using a slightly larger cast of performers. An added splash or two of fresh orange, lemon or grapefruit juice is a great way to add more dimension and pizzazz to the mix.

A few tips about juicing limes. Fruit at room temperature yields more juice than chilled fruit. Avoid getting the bitter white pith of the lime from getting into the juice. While pulp in orange or grapefruit juice is a cache of quality, lime and lemon juice needs to be strained before use. Pouring freshly squeezed juice through a cheesecloth (chinois), or strainer will do the trick.

A sour mix made using fresh lime juices need to be refrigerated. While only a guideline, most fresh juices won't keep much more than 24 hours before needing to be discarded.

• **A SWEET DIFFERENCE** — Simple syrup is a workhorse behind the bar and crucial to making a fresh sour mix. It is easily prepared by combining equal parts of sugar and boiling water. Creative options include substituting granulated white sugar with brown sugar, agave nectar or fresh cane juice (guarapo). Each will produce slightly different tasting cocktails.

Another creative twist is infusing syrups with the flavor of cucumber, peppers, spices, ginger or seasonal fruit. They're made by slowly heating equal parts of water, granulated sugar or agave nectar and the featured flavoring agent until all of the various components have fully integrated. For specialized drinks, creating customized flavored syrups is a viable tact.

• **THE PEOPLE'S MARGARITA** is one of many award-winning cocktails featured at Jax Kitchen in Tucson. Crafted by owner/chef and celebrated mixologist Brian Metzger, the drink in part derives its singularly delicious character from mint and basil infused agave nectar.

• **PUTTING ON A GAME FACE** — Before unleashing a signature Margarita make sure that it looks as fabulous as it tastes. That process begins with the ritual of rimming the glass with salt. Consider salting only half the rim, which guests the opportunity of moderating how much salt they consume. If given the time, salt the Margarita glasses in advance, allowing the lime juice and salt combination to harden. This will alleviate the messy problem of salt falling off the rim of the glass.

There are now are a number of brands of flavored salts, as well as different colors and flavors of sugars with which to embellish

your cocktail.

• **COUP DE GRÂCE** — The final touch to any noteworthy Margarita is the garnish. The obvious choice is a lime wedge, which permits guests to add a delightful blast of fresh juice to the drink. Lime wheels are attractive, but not functional.

There are two common mistakes bartenders make when garnishing a Margarita. The first is outfitting the cocktail with a puny sliver of a lime. The second is dropping the lime wedge into the drink. Do bartenders really expect a guest to fish the lime out with their fingers? Or what about a bartender who squeezes the lime wedge before dropping it into the drink. Now there's a crushed piece of fruit staring up at the guest. The most advisable move is to hook the lime wedge on the rim of the glass and let the guest to do with the garnish as he or she sees fit.

Here's the last piece of advice regarding creating a Margarita sensation. Experience suggests to start by devising a refreshing, eminently delicious base sour mix. If well balanced, it'll taste fabulous by itself. Then add in the tequila and modifier. It should be a smooth and pleasant journey from there.

### Margarita Bliss

Looking for some creative inspiration? Here's a handful of genuinely inspired recipes suitable for framing. Money back guaranteed. — RP

#### LOOK BETTER NAKED MARGARITA

Specialty of Adam Seger, sommelier/  
mixologist, Nacional 27, Chicago, IL

- 1-1/2 oz. Partida Estate Blanco Tequila
- 1/2 oz. Sambazon Pure Organic Açaf
- 3/4 oz. Partida Organic Agave Nectar
- 1/2 oz. organic egg white
- 1 oz. fresh lime juice
- 4-inch sprig rosemary, top inch reserved for garnish

Remove the rosemary leaves from the stem and muddle in an empty pint glass until aromatic. Add ice and the remaining ingredients, shake the contents vigorously and strain into a chilled cocktail glass (10 ounces) rimmed with a mixture of organic sea salt and cracked green peppercorns.

#### POINT LOBOS

Specialty of Jeffrey Morgenthaler, bar manager/  
mixologist, Clyde Common, Portland, OR

- 2 oz. El Tesoro Platinum
- 1 oz. fresh lemon juice
- 1/2 oz. simple syrup (1:1)
- 1/2 oz. egg white
- 1 tsp. rhubarb jam

Combine ingredients in mixing glass, add ice and shake the contents vigorously. Strain

into a chilled cocktail glass (10 ounces) rimmed with salt and garnish with a fresh lime wedge.

#### THE ONE MARGARITA

Specialty of Brian Metzger, owner/chef/  
mixologist, Jax Kitchen, Tucson, AZ

- 2 oz. Milagro Silver Tequila
- 1/2 oz. Cointreau
- 1/2 oz. fresh lime juice
- 1/2 oz. fresh Meyer lemon juice
- 1 oz. orange and basil-infused simple syrup
- 2 oz. Orange-Basil Granita\*
- Blackberry skewered with basil leaf garnish

Combine ingredients in mixing glass, saving 1 ounce of Granita for the garnish. Add ice and shake the contents vigorously. Strain into a chilled highball glass (9 ounces), scoop Granita on top of cocktail and garnish with blackberry skewered with basil leaf.

\*Orange-Basil Granita (2 quarts)

- 1/2 cup sugar
- 1/4 cup packed fresh basil leaves, plus small sprigs for garnish
- 5 cups fresh orange juice (from about 12 large oranges)
- 1/4 cup teaspoon kosher salt
- Zest from one orange.

Place all ingredients in a blender and blend on high for 1 1/2 minutes until zest is minute and the basil has thoroughly mixed with the juice. Pour mixture onto flat bottomed dish and let sit in freezer for 45 minutes. Using a fork, "fluff" or "flake" the mixture, breaking up any large pieces that have begun to solidify. Continue this every 30 minutes until the Granita has frozen into flakes. Transfer to Tupperware bowl and store in the freezer.

#### EL TIRADITO

Specialty of Aaron A. DeFeo, manager/  
mixologist, Hotel Congress, Tucson, AZ

- 2 oz. Milagro Silver
- 1/2 oz. Cointreau
- 1/2 oz. Thai basil-infused agave nectar
- 1/2 oz. fresh lime juice
- 1 oz. fresh ruby red grapefruit juice

Combine ingredients in mixing glass, add ice and shake the contents vigorously. Strain into a chilled cocktail glass (10 ounces) rimmed with cinnamon. Garnish with a Thai basil flower.

ROBERT PLOTKIN is a judge at Paul Pacul's Ultimate Spirits Competition and author of *Secrets Revealed of America's Greatest Cocktails*. He can be reached at [www.AmericanCocktails.com](http://www.AmericanCocktails.com) or by e-mail at [robert@barmedia.com](mailto:robert@barmedia.com).

