



The MARGARITA Perfected

by Charles M. Bear Dalton



A new acquaintance recently asked me what I do for a living. When I told him I was the fine wine buyer for Spec's, he replied. "Wow. What do you do for fun?"

Well, let's see. I cook. I ride horses. I read a lot. I have been known to sip some Bourbon and

even shake up a few cocktails. Now, I am pretty particular about most of that stuff and I am most particular about my Bourbon and my cocktails. As for Bourbon, I'm fond of Maker's Mark for drinking in bars that lack a good selection of small batch Bourbon or for using in cocktails. For summer sipping, I particularly like Maker's and water with a generous squeeze of lemon. When I'm at home or on horseback during the cooler months, I tend to sip Van Winkle's 12-year-old 90° although I keep (and sip) several other small batch Bourbons such as Pritchard's, Booker's, etc. and I have several bottles I haven't tried yet. They're sort of like the pile of books I'm getting around to. As for cocktails, I'm partial to Old-Fashioneds, Manhattans, and especially Margaritas.

I make a pretty mean Old-Fashioned (muddled, thank you very much) and an elegant Manhattan (served "up" and garnished with frozen red grapes) but my lasting cocktail passion has been the Margarita.

Coming of age in Texas and working as a bartender beginning in 1977 (ah, the advantages of a misspent youth), I immediately liked Margaritas in all forms but developed a particular affinity for the classic 1/3 Tequila, 1/3 Triple Sec, 1/3 fresh squeezed lime juice formula. Over the years, I've encountered variations too numerous to list. Nevertheless, I remember the first time I had a "Top Shelf" Margarita. It was a blend of Cuervo Gold, Cointreau (a very premium quality brand of triple sec), Cognac, Rose's lime juice, and a splash of orange juice. It was different and even good and very smooth. Other "top shelf" Margaritas used Grand Marnier instead of the Cointreau and the Cognac with the rest of the ingredients the same. The Grand Marnier version doesn't have the edge of the classic recipe.

In the early 1990s, I remember ordering a Margarita in the lobby bar of the Sonoma Mission Inn and getting something approximating a watered-down Daiquiri. After seeing the look on my face after tasting it, the bartender invited me behind the bar to show her how to make my kind of Margarita. She had all the basic ingredients and we soon got things fixed. She served quite few that day and the next time I was in Sonoma, she was still shaking 'em up my way. I had a similar experience last winter at a Chili's in Paso Robles.



In the summer of 2006, Dr. Glenn Cordua of the Hilton College of Hotel and Restaurant Management at the University of Houston and I were in Bordeaux. While walking back to our Hotel after a fabulous dinner at La Tupina (Foie Gras, Rib Steak, Goose Fat French Fries) we decided we needed a Margarita to finish off the evening. Not expecting to find the know-how, we walked into several bars to see if they even had the ingredients. The first several (including one called "Tequila") didn't even have Tequila. Then we walked into Grand Bar Castan. Not only did they have Tequila, they had a Margarita "Up" on their cocktail menu. And they were playing Texas Blues on the sound system. Glenn and I had found our home in Bordeaux. The Margaritas were excellent. They used Herradura Silver, Cointreau, and fresh squeezed lime juice. The flavors were classic and they had enough bite. These were easily the best Margaritas I'd had outside of Texas. My problem was that they were a bit too good. They challenged me to begin working on my recipe again. From then until now, I have tried and tweaked and I think I now have it.

I don't use "Gold Tequila", as it is usually not 100% Agave. I don't use "Añejo", as it is wasted in a cocktail and some Añejos are just too oaky. I prefer 100% Agave White Tequila (often called "Silver") but will use 100% Agave pale "Reposado" in a pinch.

I've tried virtually all the Triple Secs on the market as well as several other orange liqueurs. As much as I like Grand Marnier, for me at least, it doesn't work in Margaritas. I like Cointreau but ... I am not at all partial to the Patron Citronage; it lacks finesse and seems a bit bland. Other swear by it. My favorite premium triple sec is Luxardo "Triplum" which is made using three different types of oranges along with dried orange flowers and herbs and aged in white ash casks (very unusual) for six months. It is very intense but has an elegance of its own. In the commodity range, I quite like the Hiram Walker 48° Triple Sec and especially the 60°. These higher alcohol versions (most economy-priced Triple Secs are 30°) offer more body and more flavor for a better drink. The proof makes a difference.

I've always use fresh squeezed lime juice. My mother-in-law got tired of waiting for me to squeeze all the citrus so she got me a Cuisinart juicer to speed the process. I highly recommend them. Thank you, Nancy. While I like all lime juice, I remembered the smoothness of the "Top Shelf"

Margaritas that used some orange juice. Experimentation led me to a mix of lime, lemon (ideally Meyer lemon) and orange juices – all fresh squeezed of course.

The "Top Shelf" also convinced me that brandy has a place at this table as well. Cognac may be a bit over the top but Presidente Mexican Brandy fits the bill nicely.

Lots of experimentation led me to a formula calling for 4 parts white Tequila, 3 parts Triple Sec, 1 part Brandy, and four parts citrus juice (more on that in a moment). It worked but I kept tweaking. The tequila and brandy made sense but I had to get the triple sec right and the citrus juice mix right. After a lot of trial and error ("Good judgment comes from experience and a lot of that comes from bad judgment" – I also collect "cowboy philosophy"), I arrived at a formula my friends and family have dubbed "The Margarita Perfected". The final blend is ...

The MARGARITA Perfected continued from *page 1*

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4 ounces 100% Agave White Tequila (*at home I use Alteño Silver Tequila*)
 2 ounces Luxardo "Triplum" Triple Sec
 1 ounce Hiram Walker 48° Triple Sec
 1 ounce Presidente Mexican Brandy
 4-5 ounces Citrus Juice Mix (*see below*)
 and a bit of sweetener (*either ½ ounce of simple syrup or 2 packets of Splenda*)

The Citrus Juice Mix is ...

the juice of one large lemon (preferably a Meyer Lemon)
 the juice of one medium-small orange
 and the juice of enough limes (about six medium limes) to bring the total juice to 10 ounces.

(key limes do not work)

Combine all the ingredients in a cocktail shaker with ice cubes and shake vigorously. I go for 48 shakes. Strain the mixture off of the shaking ice into a salt rimmed serving glass. In our house, this makes enough for two cocktails with a bit leftover for a top up. This recipe works beautifully served up in a salt-rimmed martini glass with a lime wedge garnish but most often we strain it over fresh ice in a salt-rimmed old-fashioned glass with a lime wedge garnish.

A note on salt rimming your glasses: you can use kosher salt but for home use, I like to use purpose packaged Margarita salt as it comes in a convenient wide and shallow container for salting the rim and has a proper lid for re-sealing the leftover salt. To get the salt to stick to the rim, take a piece of cut lime and run it around the rim of the glass before you dip the rim in the salt. Do not use table salt as the grain is too fine and you will therefore get the wrong flavor and texture.

My friend and fellow wine and Margarita enthusiast Sean Beck (sommelier at Back Street Café and Hugo's, designer of Hugo's excellent Margarita menu, and all around good guy) has said (without having actually tasted one) that I am going for smooth (it's the orange juice and brandy) and he's right; however, these do still have a bite.

As to this complex recipe, I know this sounds like a lot of trouble to go to for a simple cocktail but, as with Julia Child's Beef Bourguignon, you will find that the result is worth the trouble. Or you can just keep going out to drink Kool-aide frozen Margaritas - which is a bit like substituting canned beef stew for that sainted Beef Bourguignon. A final

note: if you've done it right, this drink is so well balanced that you cannot taste the booze in it so we (the lovely Miss Carol and me) limit our guests to one Margarita per person - unless they are occupying the guest suite.

As Julia would say "Bon Appetit".

And as one of my ne're-do-well friends said "Thank you, sir. May I have another?" ❀

