

## TOP-SHELF MARGARITAS

What's the secret ingredient for a perfect margarita?

Hint: It's not necessarily the tequila.

By Jessica Goldbogen-Harlan

Margaritas are no longer the domain of frat parties and tourist traps. This cocktail, once found mainly in frozen form and in a rainbow of colors not seen in nature, is all grown up, and bartenders across the country are increasingly incorporating top-shelf spirits, such as luxury liqueurs and premium tequilas into a beverage that is designed to be sipped and savored, not slammed.

For instance, an increasing number of bartenders – and their patrons – pay attention to an essential margarita ingredient, orange-flavored liqueur, and requesting the high-end spirit Grand Marnier, rather than a less-expensive substitute. Whatever the tequila with which it's mixed, discerning margarita connoisseurs have discovered that Grand Marnier makes all the difference between a drink that's passable or sublime.

Grand Marnier is cognac-based and infused with macerated oranges. The rich, deep flavor balances the harshness of the tequila, and the orange zest used to make the spirit also blends well with the acidic lime.

With three varieties to choose from, there are plenty of options for adding an elegant touch to any margarita. Grand Marnier Cordon Rouge, the most popular Grand Marnier marquee, is oak-aged for up to 10 years and has a flavor of bitter oranges, with nuances of orange marmalade and hazelnuts. Grand Marnier Cuvée du Centenaire, which was released as a centennial celebration of the company, is aged up to 25 years, and has notes of dried fruit, gingerbread and nutmeg, with a lingering finish.

Grand Marnier Cuvée du Cent Cinquantaire, created for the 150th anniversary of the company, uses rare Cognac reserves that are aged up to 50 years. The flavor of this special marquee includes macerated bitter orange, coffee, honey, bitter almond and spices, and ends in a complex and lengthy finish.

"As margaritas continue to grow in popularity, consumers become more sophisticated and they're going to demand more sophisticated products in their drinks," said Ian Crystal,

senior brand manager for Grand Marnier.

Bartenders and mixologists across the country are certainly picking up on the interest in a better margarita.

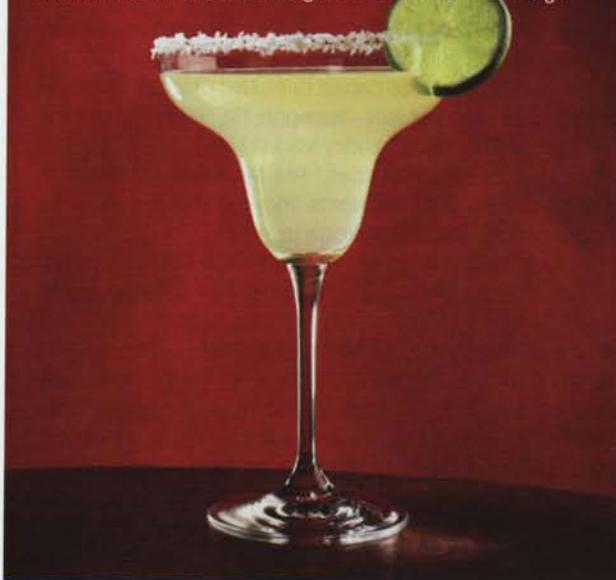
As its name might suggest, Agave, one of the top Southwestern restaurants in Atlanta, takes its margaritas seriously. The restaurant has 87 tequilas on hand from which to choose, ranging in price from \$6 to \$35 a shot.

"Tequila has come into its own within the last three to five

### GRAND MARGARITA

1 oz. Grand Marnier  
2 ozs. Jose Cuervo Traditional or another premium tequila  
1 oz. freshly squeezed lime juice  
Sugar to taste, Salt, Lime wedge

Moisten the rim of margarita glass and rim with salt. Fill shaker with ice. Add Grand Marnier, tequila and lime juice to the shaker. Shake briefly to combine, season to taste with sugar. Shake again for 15 seconds. Pour into salt-rimmed glass. Garnish with lime wedge.



years," said Tim Pinkham, Agave's general manager. "It used to be known as a wild, hangover liquor, but it's really caught on as far as something that can be sipped. And margaritas, of course, are following suit."

For Agave's higher-end margaritas, with the more luxurious Reposado or Añejo tequilas, Agave's bartenders will often use Grand Marnier. These tequilas, which are aged at least two months or one year, respectively, (unlike the less expensive tequila blanco, which is bottled soon after distillation) have notes of honey, brown spices and brown sugar, the results of using an oak or bourbon barrel aging process, explained Pinkham.

"Grand Marnier, being a flavored liqueur, brings out those flavors of honey and brown spice," he said. "It mixes nicely together."

One of the restaurant's most exclusive margaritas is the Suprema Sentenario Margarita, which combines Cuervo Reserva de la Familia with Grand Marnier Centenaire, fresh lime juice and a splash of sour, served straight up.

The price tag for this luxurious cocktail? \$35.

"It's for those guests who come in and really want to have the 'wow' factor with their margarita," Pinkham said.

Rosa Mexicana, which has six locations in New York City, Washington, D.C., Atlanta and West Palm Beach, is also known for its margarita program. Some of the restaurant locations have anywhere from 50 to 75 different tequilas behind the bar, and Grace Hu, corporate beverage director, said that the popularity of the spirit is growing.

"People are appreciating the flavor profile and the work that's put into creating them, like a fine cognac or a fine wine," she said.

Hu also thinks that tequila gives imbibers a different "buzz quality" than other alcohol. "It tends to be a happy buzz, rather than a flat buzz," she said.

The margarita list is changing soon to incorporate more variety and new flavors. One of the newest drinks, which recently debuted in the Palm Beach location, is the La Suprema. It's made of Patron Reposado tequila, Grand Marnier Centenaire, Citron orange liqueur and fresh lime juice, and ranges in price from \$16 to \$20, depending on the restaurant's location.

Like Pinkham at Agave, Hu says that Grand Marnier brings a more complex flavor profile to margaritas than other orange liqueurs.

"It has a stronger flavor and more elegance," Hu said. "But ultimately, part of it is the name recognition."

Will there come a day when it's the norm to walk into a bar and specify your tequila and liqueur in your margarita order? Sure, Crystal said. "It happened in the martini craze, and there's no reason why it wouldn't happen in the margarita trend."



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