“Pierre Ferrand Dry Curaçao Newly developed from an old recipe with the help of cocktail historian David Wondrich, this orange liqueur has pleasant Cognac-like elements and a nose of orange zest and blossoms.”

Mastering the Margarita

It's time to pour the mix down the drain and discover the party cocktail's deeper side.

IN SPANISH, margarita means "daisy." But in North America, I believe the translation is closer to "super fun time."

Totally fine to think of the cocktail that way, but let's put down the ready-made, Day-Glo sour mix, step away from the margarita machine and take the drink seriously for just a moment. The margarita may conjure images of spring break in Cancún and fishbowl glasses with cactuses as stems or yardstick-long containers filled with boozy slush. But the cocktail is so much more than that.

It doesn't take much to elevate the margarita to the top of the drink canon. Despite its unfortunate reputation as the Lindsay Lohan of the drink world, it deserves to rub elbows with the likes of the Manhattan and the martini. A properly made margarita is like Emma Stone—fun-loving but, deep down, classy and smart.

Pick an Orange Liqueur

F. Martin Ramin for The Wall Street Journal

An orange liqueur delivers the margarita's rich sweetness.

This is what delivers the margarita's rich sweetness. Don't make it an afterthought: Avoid generic-looking triple secs.

Pierre Ferrand Dry Curaçao Newly developed from an old recipe with the help of cocktail historian David Wondrich, this orange liqueur has pleasant Cognac-like elements and a nose of orange zest and blossoms (40% ABV, $26).
Like any other drink, it is only as good as its worst ingredient. Fortunately, the basic margarita only has three: tequila, triple sec and lime juice. Choose a spirit made of 100% agave, stock your bar with a solid orange-flavored liqueur, squeeze fresh lime juice—think of how strong your forearms will get!—and nail the proportions and you'll have a wonderfully balanced sweet, tangy, slightly earthy (that's the 100% agave) drink to sip this Cinco de Mayo and throughout the summer.

"Where's the strawberry?" you might be asking. "Can I get extra salt on my rim?" Purists scoff at alterations to the margarita—yes, the harshest sticklers say no salt—but the add-ons are part of the drink's fun factor. "Margaritas are like burgers," said Bobby Heugel, owner of Anvil Bar & Refuge in Houston, one of Texas's craft cocktail meccas. "There can be good ones on the high, gourmet level, and good ones at the low, fast-food-like level, too." At Anvil there are several versions of the margarita, a basic one (1¾ ounces tequila, ¾ ounce Combier, ¾ ounce lime juice, 1 bar spoon agave) and the special Anvil margarita, which is a blend of different agave-based spirits as well as orange bitters. (Mr. Heugel keeps the exact recipe a secret.)

In the margarita experimentation game, as long as you're using quality ingredients, you're winning. That means no margarita mixes. Variations can be as subtle as swapping one citrus out for another, choosing an aged tequila over a blanco or, as in Tommy's margarita from Tommy's Mexican Restaurant in San Francisco, ditching triple sec in favor of agave syrup. On the more elaborate end of the spectrum, margaritas can be imbued with fruit purées, rimmed with chipotle-spiced salt or incorporate spirits outside of standard margarita territory, such as Campari or green Chartreuse.

But the key ingredient, really, is fun. We've gathered some of the best margarita recipes from around the country to help you prepare for the warm months ahead. And if you need an excuse to pull this article out in the fall, Sept. 16 is Mexican Independence Day. So here's to the margarita...and to super-fun times.
The classic Margarita plus five intoxicating electives


1. **Siesta**

A bright and fresh margarita variation for those who like things a little more tangy. The Campari and grapefruit juice round things out with just the right amount of bitterness.

1½ ounces blanco tequila  
¾ ounce fresh lime juice  
¾ ounce simple syrup  
½ ounce fresh grapefruit juice  
¼ ounce Campari  
Orange twist

Shake liquid ingredients with ice and strain into a cocktail glass. Garnish with an orange twist.

*From Katie Stipe of Flatiron Lounge, New York*
2. Joey's Margarita

It is a little-known fact that green Chartreuse partners well with tequila. The French liqueur adds a beautiful *je ne sais quoi* to this cocktail while the egg white gives it a sophisticated, airy body. A grown-up's margarita.

2 ounces blanco tequila
1 ounce fresh lime juice
½ ounce green Chartreuse
¼ ounce agave nectar
½ ounce egg white

Shake ingredients without ice to emulsify egg white. Add ice, shake again and strain into a rocks glass over ice. Salted rim and lime garnish are optional.

*From Giuseppe González of Golden Cadillac, New York*

3. The Classic Margarita

Ask five bartenders for their classic margarita and you'll get five slightly different recipes. That's OK. The margarita aims to please. Consider this recipe a base line. Too sweet? Use ¼ ounce more lime. Too tart? Add agave, ¼ ounce more orange liqueur or both. Too boozy? Delete a ¼ ounce tequila. (We find serving it on the rocks covers up slight imperfections.) A request: When you make a slam-dunk margarita, try it with no ice and no salt. You'll make the cocktail gods happy.

2 ounces tequila
¾ ounce orange liqueur
¾ ounce fresh lime juice
¼ ounce agave nectar (optional)

Shake ingredients with ice and strain into a cocktail glass or over ice into a rocks glass. Salted rim and lime garnish are optional.

4. Tommy's Margarita

Julio Bermejo, the state of Jalisco, Mexico's "Ambassador of tequila to the United States" invented this drink 15, 16 or 17 years ago—"Things get blurry over the years," he said—because he didn't feel like saccharine triple sec was doing tequila justice. Instead, he swapped it for agave nectar to create a classic in its own right. Once you try this seminal margarita variation, you may never pick up another bottle of triple sec again.

2 ounces 100% agave tequila
1 ounce fresh lime juice
1 ounce agave nectar syrup (1 part agave nectar to 1 part water)

Shake ingredients with ice and strain into a cocktail glass.

从Julio Bermejo of Tommy's Mexican Restaurant, San Francisco

5. Sangre de Cenobio

This elegant margarita variation uses dessert wine (a Lacrima or Sauternes is recommended) instead of triple sec to give the drink a surprising, complex sweetness. The black lava salt is a nice theatrical touch and a nod to the volcanic soil where agave plants commonly flourish.

Black lava salt
2 ounces tequila
¾ ounce dessert wine
1 ounce fresh lime juice
½ ounce agave nectar

Lime peel

Rim glass with black lava salt. Shake liquid ingredients with ice and strain into a cocktail glass. Garnish with lime peel.

从Brian Means of Fifth Floor, San Francisco

6. Breakfast Margarita

A 'rita that's fresh and light enough to have instead of a bloody mary or a mimosa with breakfast.

1½ ounces blanco tequila
¾ ounce Cointreau
1 ounce mango nectar
1 ounce fresh tangerine juice
¾ ounce fresh lemon juice
¼ ounce ginger juice

Tangerine wedge
Shake ingredients with ice and strain into a rocks glass over ice. Garnish with a tangerine wedge.

From Nate Wales of La Condesa, Austin, Texas

The Margarita Experimentation Guide

It's simple: Use the classic recipe above, follow the tips below and say hello to your perfect margarita.

1. Choose Your Tequila

Look for 100% agave on the tequila label.

Key words to look for on the label: 100% agave. Anything else is for the spring break crowd.

Blanco This is how the drink is classically made, giving the margarita the bright, green, peppery freshness it's come to be known for. Generally, a highland tequila like Ocho Plata (40% ABV, $50) will give you more spicy, citrusy notes while a lowlands one like Partida Blanco (40% ABV, $50) will be crisper and fruitier. At around $20 a bottle, Espolón (40% ABV) is a steal.

Reposado This is a tequila aged for two to 11 months, which accounts for its slightly woody flavors. Siete Leguas (40% ABV, $43) has great balance between sweet agave notes and oak.

Añejo Some say using a tequila aged over a year is a waste in a cocktail, but if you like oakiness, go for it. Most can get pricey, but Milagro Añejo is a good option for a margarita (40% ABV, $33).
**Mezcal**  Technically not a tequila, but still made from agave, mezcal is generally smokier and more savory. The fruit-forward, easy-sipping Del Maguey Vida (40% ABV, $34) is an approachable introduction to the spirit. Those seeking more spice and smoke should stock up on Sombra Mezcal (40% ABV, $32).

2. **Pick an Orange Liqueur**

*Martin Ramin for The Wall Street Journal*

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**Cointreau**  Pure and clean, Cointreau is the top-shelf standard when it comes to margaritas (40% ABV, $40).

**Pierre Ferrand Dry Curaçao**  Newly developed from an old recipe with the help of cocktail historian David Wondrich, this orange liqueur has pleasant Cognac-like elements and a nose of orange zest and blossoms (40% ABV, $26).

**Combier**  This has become the choice of the craft bartender set as it offers a more subtle orange taste with a hint of bitterness (40% ABV, $40).
3. Stick to Fresh Lime Juice

Squeeze lime halves in a hand juicer.

We know, it's so much easier to use mixes. But none of them are going to beat freshly squeezed lime juice. To yield the most liquid, use room-temperature limes, gently roll them on the counter to loosen the pulp (but not too much or they’ll turn bitter) and squeeze lime halves in a hand juicer such as this one from Chef’N ($20). Limes vary in tartness. If your margarita is too tart, try adding a bit of agave nectar to even things out.

4. Season It Right

Don't use table salt.

The only rule: Don't use table salt. It tastes funny and the grains are too small. Other than that, be creative. Kosher salt is the standard and sea salt is a lighter option. Smoked salt works well with a mezcal margarita. Spice fans should add morita chili to their salt (a coffee grinder helps mix them evenly). The citrusy, spicy, salty Tajín, a Mexican fruit seasoning, works wonders too. Kalustyans.com has a wide selection of salts.
How to Salt the Rim of a Glass: Step 1

*How to Salt the Rim of a Glass*

1. Take a quarter out of an orange so that it resembles Pac-Man. Rub the outside edge of the glass on the orange pulp.

Step 2

2. Roll the glass rim in a plate of salt—make sure there's a plentiful amount; it's just salt, after all—and try to keep the coverage even. Consider salting only half the rim. That way you'll have the option of sipping with salt or without.

Step 3
3. If the salt is uneven, use a cocktail napkin to tidy up the rim. Make sure there's no salt on the inside of the glass. Stick the glass in the freezer. This will help the salt crystallize.


You're not going to earn cocktail purist kudos for ordering a frozen margarita, but who cares about drink snobbery when it's 97 degrees outside? As long as you're sticking to fresh juices, fresh fruit and high-quality tequila, there's nothing wrong with busting out the blender.
Here's a modern frozen classic that we love, from Bobby Flay's Mesa Grill. It has just the right amount of sweetness and is served on the rocks—in other words, it looks more like a proper drink and not something that came out of a margarita machine. The Fresno chili is optional, but really makes the drink. This is the cocktail you want to have in your hand when you're backyard barbecuing this summer.

**Pineapple Chili Margarita**

6 ounces tequila

2 cups fresh pineapple juice

1 cup pineapple, coarsely chopped

1 Fresno chili, coarsely chopped (optional)

Combine tequila, pineapple juice, pineapple and chili in a blender and blend until smooth. Serve over ice in a rocks glass.

**More Recipes**

**The Señorita**

A variation that maintains the template of the classic margarita recipe but uses Compass Box Orangerie, a Scotch infused with orange peel, for a much more complex orange flavor. The agave nectar is a nod to Tommy's Margarita.

2 ounces reposado tequila

½ ounce Compass Box Orangerie

¾ ounce fresh lime juice

½ ounce agave nectar

1 dash grapefruit bitters

Shake ingredients with ice and strain into a cocktail glass.

*From Philip Ward of Mayahuel, New York*

**Western Daisy**

The Daisy is a type of sour cocktail that, like the margarita (Spanish for daisy), has three basic elements: a spirit, something sweet and citrus. Think of this as a delicate-tasting proto-'rita.

2 ounces blanco tequila

½ ounce yellow Chartreuse
¾ ounce fresh lemon juice

¼ ounce simple syrup

3 drops rosewater

Grapefruit knot

Shake first four ingredients with ice and strain into a rocks glass over ice. Add three drops of rosewater and garnish with grapefruit knot.

From Alchemy Consulting for Andaz Wall Street, New York

Spiced Daisy

The key to this variation is Royal Combier, a Grand Marnier-like liqueur that is a blend of triple sec, Cognac and Elixir de Combier, a 19th-century French liqueur containing cardamom, cinnamon and saffron. The chili and salt mixture is awesome on other margaritas as well.

Smoked morita chili and salt mixture (2 parts salt to 1 part chili)

2 ounces blanco tequila

½ ounce Royal Combier

½ ounce agave nectar

1 ounce fresh lime juice

Salt half the rim of a cocktail glass with smoked morita chili and salt mixture. Shake remaining ingredients with ice and strain into glass. Garnish with a kaffir lime leaf (optional).

From Raul Yrastorza of Las Perlas, Los Angeles

Ground to Glass

A delicious, garden-fresh margarita. You'll feel healthy drinking it. The hickory smoked salt is available at kalustyans.com.

Hickory smoked salt

3 cucumber slices

2 ounces tequila

1 ounce fresh lime juice

¾ ounce agave syrup (1 part agave nectar to 1 part water)
½ ounce red-pepper purée*

2 dashes orange bitters

Rim rocks glass with hickory smoked salt. Muddle cucumber in cocktail shaker. Add the other ingredients, shake with ice and double strain into a rocks glass over ice. *To make red pepper purée take 3 seeded red peppers and blend them in a food processor.

From Greg Seider of Summit Bar, New York

Daisy's on Fire

A bold blend of mezcal smoke, St-Germain grapefruit-y sweetness and tart blood orange citrus. If the blood oranges are too sweet, add a dash of lime juice.

1 ounce blanco tequila

¾ ounce fresh blood orange juice

¾ ounce St-Germain Elderflower Liqueur

½ ounce mezcal

1 dash grapefruit bitters

Blood orange zest

Shake liquid ingredients with ice and fine strain into a cocktail glass. Cut a small disc of zest from a blood orange and flame the oils over the top of the drink, discard the disc.

From Josh Loving of Fino, Austin, Texas

Smoky Margarita

A good introduction to those curious about mezcal. The smoke peaks through just enough to make you want to go back to the glass for more.

1½ ounces blanco tequila

½ ounce Grand Marnier

¼ ounce mezcal

1 ounce fresh lime juice

½ ounce agave nectar

Lime wheel
Shake liquid ingredients with ice and pour into a cocktail glass or a rocks glass over ice. Garnish with a lime wheel.

From Steve Olson of Viktor & Spoils, New York

Corrections & Amplifications
Mexican Independence Day is Sept. 16. An earlier version of this article incorrectly said it was Sept. 12. Also, a previous version of this article stated that the Siesta cocktail was created by Julian Cox of Rivera Los Angeles. It was created by Katie Stipe while at New York's Flat Iron Lounge.