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Margarita's Achilles' heel

The right orange liqueur can make or break your drink



By Margaret Sheridan, Special to Tribune Newspapers

October 10, 2010

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Recipes for a margarita are pretty straightforward: tequila, fresh lime juice and orange-flavored liqueur. How simple.

Not really.

Choices for this third ingredient drive devotees of tequila's most famous cocktail into endless debate. How much should you pay for orange liqueur? And why? Prices range from \$9 for a domestic triple sec to \$28 and beyond for premiums with passports, such as Cointreau and Grand Marnier. How critical is their role? Very. It's all about balance and your taste.

"The orange-flavored liqueur is used to complement the flavor of tequila," says Tony Abou-Ganim, the Las Vegas-based beverage consultant and author of "The Modern Mixologist" (Surrey Books, \$35). Abou-Ganim opts for the

premium French-made Cointreau. This 80-proof liqueur delivers a soft, floral taste and orange flavor. It is well-rounded and less harsh than many triple secs, he says.

A bottle of Cointreau and Grand Marnier. (Bill Hogan/ Chicago Tribune / October 9, 2010)

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Mike Ryan, of Sable Kitchen & Bar in Chicago, swears by curacao. A stepchild of Valencia oranges, this member of the triple sec family delivers a strong orange flavor without excessive sweetness. Says Ryan: "It lends a richer, rounder **mouth**-feel. It is less expensive than premiums such as Cointreau or Grand Marnier." His preferred brand is Marie

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Brizard.

Another contender for that elusive ingredient is Grand Marnier. What distinguishes this French-made product from triple sec or Cointreau is its cognac base. It delivers a strong, distinctive taste. Some critics contend it competes, and overpowers, the taste of tequila. But Paul Tanguay, who creates the beverage menu for Double A Lounge in Chicago, uses Grand Marnier for that unique taste and mouth-feel. "You can't replace the viscosity and velvety effect on the tongue of Grand Marnier."

OK. The choice is yours. But heed some words of wisdom on the making of margaritas. Abou-Ganim advises: "As in baking, measure all ingredients. Use recipes. Each ingredient contributes to the balance."

Ryan advises hosts to banish all shortcuts such as mixes, limeade and bottled lime juice. "It's not worth the sharp, heartburning, candy nastiness that's typical of a bad margarita."

Margarita primo

Using Cointreau and good-quality tequila makes this drink primo, writes Tony Abou-Ganim In "The Modern Mixologist."

Pour 2 ounces 100 percent agave silver tequila, 1 ounce Cointreau, 2 ounces fresh lemon sour and 1 ounce fresh lime juice in a mixing glass; shake with ice until blended. Strain into an ice-filled goblet. Garnish with lime wedge.

Lemon sour: Mix 2 parts fresh lemon juice with 1 part simple syrup.

Mike's margarita

From Mike Ryan, head bartender at Sable Kitchen & Bar.

2 ounces Milagro Blanco Tequila

3/4 ounce fresh lime juice

3/4 ounce Marie Brizard Orange Curacao

Splash of simple syrup

Shake tequila, lime juice and curacao well in cocktail shaker with ice, adding simple syrup to taste, if desired to adjust the sweetness. Strain into a glass, skipping the salt.

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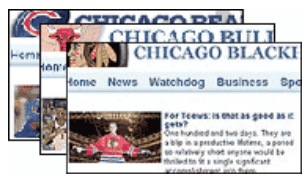
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