

A Perfect Summer Drink

Ainsley Szvitak's Popcorn Jalapeño Margarita



BY AINSLEY SZVITAK
PHOTOGRAPHY BY ALISHA TOWNSEND

There could never be a more perfect summer cocktail than a margarita. It's sweet, sour, bitter, salty and esthetically pleasing. A margarita has it all.

When I create cocktails, I try to find things that inspire me, even if it is the smallest flavour, colour or smell. Westwood Greenhouses in New Hamburg recently brought microgreen samples of popcorn shoots to our restaurant and they were so delicious I had to build an entire cocktail around those flavours. Popcorn shoots have a gorgeous pale yellow colour, with a mildly sweet flavour and undertones of anise.

I began thinking of what spirits would work well with these flavours and was drawn immediately to tequila. Tequila has great structure, making it perfect for the beginning of a cocktail. It's sweet, bitter, savoury and just wonderful all around.

Selecting a brand of tequila was not a challenge. I love to use local products as much as possible, but there is no such thing as Canadian tequila. The next best thing is to use a tequila that has an Ontarian partner attached to the brand, so Tromba became my choice.

TYPES OF TEQUILA

Blanco: White tequila is bottled immediately after distillation with no aging in oak barrels. It is always crisp, clean and great for light cocktails. I love Blanco tequila for Palomas or a fun Champagne cocktail.

Anejo: This tequila is aged for a minimum of one year in wooden barrels. It is perfect for sipping with a small amount of distilled water added or on a large ice cube, sometimes with a lime zest. Anejo tequila should be enjoyed the same way you enjoy a scotch or bourbon. Use it in a cocktail that doesn't have too many ingredients, allowing the tequila to be the star. Anejo



tequila could be used for a fun spin on an Old Fashioned or Manhattan or, if you prefer cocktails with a bite, even try it as a Negroni.

Reposado: Its name means rested and it spends a minimum of two months in wooden vats or oak barrels. This is what gives this tequila its beautiful signature golden colour. Aging in oak also gives the spirit more structure and flavour, making this my choice of tequila for margaritas.

The Tromba Reposado tequila in my margarita is aged for six months in American whiskey barrels, which really elevates the smooth, easy drinking quality. This tequila has an array of scents and flavours, such as cacao, pineapple, toasted

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Popcorn Jalapeño Margarita

Single serving

1 ½ ounces (42½ ml) Tromba
Reposado popcorn-infused tequila
½ ounce (14 ml) homemade lime
liqueur or Cointreau
2 ounces (56½ ml) lime juice

Serve up a pitcher

(Eight to 10 servings)

1 750-millilitre bottle of Tromba
Reposado popcorn-infused tequila
2 cups (500 ml) homemade lime
liqueur or Cointreau
2 cups (500 ml) lime juice
½ cup (125 ml) simple syrup for extra
sweetness due to larger amount
being made

1. Combine all ingredients into a Boston Shaker, or whatever cocktail shaker you have, and shake aggressively. You want to shake for a good 30 seconds – singing “Happy Birthday” in your head is a good measurement of this. Shake well, as you want the ice to break into smaller pieces.

2. For the pitcher, pour all ingredients over ice in a pitcher and stir to combine and then pour into glasses and garnish.

3. Blending your margarita will water it down, so I do not recommend this. If you choose to use a blender, add an extra half ounce each of lime juice and homemade liqueur to ensure your cocktail is still flavourful.

4. Rub a lime wedge around the rim of your margarita glass to ensure the jalapeño salt will stick to the glass. Do not strain your cocktail, simply open your Boston Shaker and empty all contents into the salt-rimmed glass.

5. Garnish with popcorn shoots, thinly sliced jalapeños and jalapeño oil (optional) for extra spice.

Enjoy!



nuts and oranges, finishing with smoke and charred wood.

POPCORN INFUSION

To respect the time and love that has gone into creating such a beautiful tequila, I want to enhance certain aspects to create a very specific craft cocktail. This is where the popcorn comes into play. It elevates the toasted notes on tequila and adds a light buttery aspect.

I really enjoy infusing spirits, not necessarily to change them but to play on the flavours they are lending to the cocktail.

Infusing is incredibly easy. The longer you leave the spirit in contact with whatever your infusing ingredient is the more concentrated the flavour will become. It can take one hour or a few days.

For popcorn tequila I really just want a mild flavour, so no more than three hours is needed. Doing an infusion on a spirit also makes it feel more like it's your cocktail because you are creating those flavours.

LIME LIQUEUR

Making my own ingredients has its challenges, but the rewards are always worth it. There's a lot of trial and error, but once you've figured it out it's very easy.

I decided to make my own lime liqueur for my margarita. Traditionally, margaritas are sweetened with Cointreau or, if you want something more elegant, Grand Marnier. However, homemade liqueur is always fun to brag about in front of the guests you are entertaining. Or, if you are enjoying this on a summer day off, then it almost makes it more enjoyable knowing

that you put so much work into this delicious beverage.

To make your own liqueur, you need an inexpensive vodka. You are drastically changing the flavour, so the quality of the spirit does not play a role in this part of the cocktail. I recommend starting with a small amount since you are only using half an ounce per cocktail when it is finished.

For every 500 millilitres of vodka, you will need three to four limes. Zest the limes entirely. I always use a potato peeler because it allows me to get only the zest of the fruit. You don't want the pith – the white part between the flesh and the skin. It is very bitter and can destroy a cocktail in an instant.

Allow the lime zests to sit in the vodka overnight or, if you want it really concentrated and you plan far in advance, you can leave it for up to three weeks.

Next, you need syrup to sweeten your liqueur. It's as simple as equal parts sugar and water. Heat until the sugar is dissolved. Then remove from heat and allow to cool before adding to the lime vodka. For every 500 ml of vodka, I use 250ml of syrup. If you like your cocktail sweeter, feel free to do equal parts lime vodka to syrup.

SALT

You can't have a margarita without salt. This is where all of the balance of the summer treat comes from.

I always enjoy a little bit of spice in pretty much any cocktail, so I decided I would make a jalapeño salt to rim the glass. Margaritas should always be rimmed with sea salt, or a higher-quality salt – table salt just doesn't do the job. You'll need the juice of one small jalapeño, which can be extracted by placing it in a blender and straining the seeds and skin. Add a little bit of jalapeño to your sea salt and stir, allowing the salt to dry before using it. It will recrystallize after being left for a half hour or so.

If you do not like a lot of spice, another option is to add a little bit of sumac to your salt. Sumac is a really beautiful floral spice and I enjoy it with all kinds of cocktails. 🌿