

## Just Add Air

A unique garnish replaces the traditional salt rim at Oyamel Cocina Mexicana in Washington, D.C.

I've always had a penchant for salt over sugar; I'm more apt to devour a bowl of potato chips than a plate of fudge brownies. I'm no tequila connoisseur, but I definitely enjoy the salty tang of a well-made Margarita on the rocks.

Unfortunately, enjoying the traditional garnish has required choosing between one of two equally awkward scenarios. Drinking the beverage through the glass rim often leaves unsightly, undetectable flakes on my upper lip. But the alternative—licking some of the salt before taking a sip—looks a bit, well, unseemly. Either way, the salt usually disappears before my drink does.

Enter José Andrés. His Oyamel Cocina Mexicana in Washington, D.C. specializes in antojitos—Mexican small plates—such as braised short ribs with mole verde sauce and also shrimp sautéed with tequila, shallots and scallions. Quality and creativity don't stop at the kitchen door, though, and one glance at the drinks menu shows a fresh ingredient focus and an imaginative solution to my cocktail conundrum.

Inspired by a technique used at Ferran Adrià's famed El Bulli restaurant in Spain, Andrés eschews the ubiquitous salt rimmer. You've heard how breathing in the salt air does wonders for the soul? Oyamel instead invites guests to sip it, topping its Margaritas with salt air.

The basic recipe for the air garnish calls for one cup of water, two tablespoons salt, a half cup lime juice and one tablespoon soy lecithin powder, a natural emulsifier. After mixing all ingredients with an immersion blender, the end result—which resembles sea foam—is carefully spooned on top of the glass. "It gets the flavor of the salt in an interesting and different way while not overpowering the natural flavors of the cocktail," says Oyamel general manager Steve Fowler.

Currently, Oyamel has several frothy sips. Andrés' favorite is the Oyamel Margarita, on the menu since the opening of the original location in Northern Virginia's Crystal City five years ago—he moved Oyamel to D.C.'s Penn Quarter in 2007—and made with Jose Cuervo, Cointreau and fresh lime juice. Added a year ago was the Pomegranate Margarita, which combines Jose Cuervo and Cointreau with pomegranate and agave nectar. Each drink's presentation is striking, with a substantial amount of air that lingers, rather than dissipates. The drinks are priced at \$10 and served in a stemless cocktail glass instead of a traditional Margarita glass—a stylistic choice, says Fowler.

As I sipped each offering, there was just enough salt flavor to complement, but not overshadow, the other ingredients. Instead of flakes getting stuck on my lip, some air did



● Salt, water, lime juice and soy lecithin powder are mixed with an immersion blender to create the unusual salt foam that garnishes Margaritas at Oyamel Cocina Mexicana.

find its way to the tip of my nose. As I drank down the tasty cocktail, though, this became less of a problem, and I definitely enjoyed the garnish's subtle flavor and light feel, as well as the drink's fashionable appearance—the glass just looked really cool sitting on the table.

The recently introduced Xoconostle is a prickly pear Margarita topped with rose air foam made by blending rose water, distilled water and soy lecithin. This air had a heady scent reminiscent of my grandmother's soaps, but the nice line of acidity from the prickly pear kept the drink balanced, not cloying. Making its debut in time for Valentine's Day was perfect timing, as the Xoconostle is akin to a liquid bouquet of roses. Its popularity kept it on the menu after the holiday. It also sells for \$10.

When a Margarita purist requests the standard salt rim at Oyamel, the server attempts to sell the air as an unusual conduit for the salt. If a customer is not satisfied with the unique finish, the drink is remade at no charge exactly as the guest wishes, says Fowler.

So what's the benefit of foregoing the traditional rimmer for this stylish topper? "It's an easy way to show that we are offering unique cocktails where the flavors of the original drinks are not changed, with a definite wow effect for the guest," says Fowler. Curious guests often inquire about what is floating on top of the drink passing by on its way to another diner. Those sitting at the bar are especially amazed to see the bartender wielding a hand blender, a tool not often seen behind the bar.

"Taking the extra time and care to do it results in a better cocktail," explains Fowler. The restaurant sells 2,000 of these uniquely finished drinks each month, generating 30 percent of cocktail sales. The garnish might be light as a feather, but the cocktail certainly adds substance to the bottom line. ●

*Kelly Magyarics is a wine educator and writer in the Washington, D.C. area who contributes to several beverage and lifestyle publications.*

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