



COCKTAILS

Cerveza en Fuego

Mix up a michelada and you're instantly south of the border.

BY MIKE KESSLER

THERE AREN'T MANY DRINKS cooler than those with Spanish names. They suggest worldliness, oppressive heat, Hemingway. The mojito, for example, announces summer's arrival and the drinker's desire to be someplace slower and dirtier. Sangría, meanwhile, connotes long naps where Cs and Zs are pronounced with lisps. And in Papa's Spain, there's always un tinto—a glass of red wine from the nearest open bottle. There is no Spanish-named drink hotter, however, than what I've come to know as the diablito, a kinky little arrangement of salt, hot sauce, lime, and the unofficial drink of Mexico: Cerveza Tecate.

The Little Devil is a makeshift affair, known well in Mexico but far less so anywhere north of the 38th parallel. I first tried one on the advice of a bartender-friend at an L.A. dive located, oddly enough, next door to a Spanish-language AA meeting room. My friend couldn't recall the drink's name, but he swore to me that the honey-colored concoction was a bona fide Mexican staple. I believed him, and the two of us sipped and poured and sipped and talked about high school or our families or nothing at all.

Soon, I ordered a diablito at the recommendation of a friendly waiter somewhere between Ensenada and Bahia de Los Angeles in Baja California. The Mexican air was hot and scratchy. The truck I was driving had lost its muffler at least twice. The diablito, explained the server, is really called a michelada—and it set me straight. It's been just as effective when applied to subsequent hangovers, North Denver taco breaks, and afternoon "saluds" of every kind.

The diablito or michelada, or whatever you want to call it, is no Bloody Mary, no healthy blend that heals by way of chest-hair tonic and vitamins. This cocktail spikes your lip like a picador and whips your tongue with

a cayenne switch. A mere sip of the effervescent red elixir will vaporize the contents of your sinuses; a whole glass and cerebral haze begone.

As far as I can tell, there's no historical significance to the diablito/michelada; its origins are, by most any account, unknown. As for its meaning, my best guess goes like this: Mi means "my"; chelada means "blondie" (its root, chela, means "blonde" or "fair"); hence, "my little blondie" must refer to the beverage's pleasant hue. Mexican restaurants of the interstate chain variety probably won't know what a michelada is; eateries owned and operated by Mexicans probably will. Some of them even use extra ingredients like Worcestershire sauce, tomato juice, and ice. I suggest you start by ordering simple. Or if you feel funny asking, just mix up a michelada yourself:

1 can Tecate, ice cold
 1 small chilled water glass
 1 bottle of Cholula or Tapatio
 Salt (the bigger the grains, the greater the experience)
 1 medium-size wedge of lime
 2 dashes of Worcestershire sauce (optional)

Split the lime wedge on the rim of the glass, and then slide it around to wet the edge. Salt the rim. Squeeze the lime and drop it into the bottom of the empty glass. Bedevil the rim with hot sauce, which will drip into the glass. Pour in one-third can of Tecate.

Don't sniff it. The vinegar whiff will throw off your game, make you hesitate like you're standing on top of a high-dive. Embrace it—the initial sting at the corners of your mouth, the zap of salt, the clash of lager with molten hot sauce. Pour some more, then sip and repeat. This little devil is hot, hot, hot. ▲