

Robb Report

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How to Make Debbie, Don't, the Refreshing Tequila Cocktail You DO Want to Drink

We love this one for its novelty, simplicity, and deliciousness.

By Jason O'Bryan

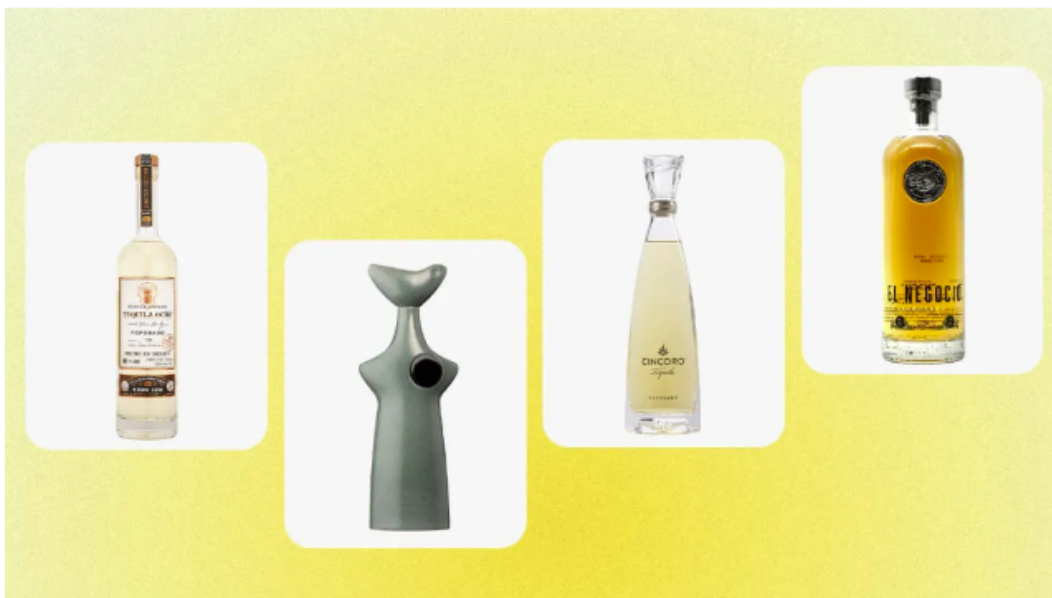
In [cocktails](#), you could say that there's two types of creativity, the easy kind and the hard kind, and the reason the Debbie, Don't cocktail is so impressive—to say nothing of being brilliant, delicious, and elegant—is that it is a dead-simple example of the hard kind.

To explain: Novelty is the dragon we bartenders are always chasing. New cocktails, new seasonal lists, new trends, it never stops—when you're creating a drink, you need to do something that you haven't seen anywhere else. But how to approach it?

Let's start with a [Margarita](#), one of the most delicious and riffed-upon cocktails ever created. Let's say you're mixing one right now, with [tequila](#), lime juice, and agave nectar. It's trivially easy to make a version that no one's ever done before, just open your pantry, close your eyes, and start grabbing: I'm reasonably certain no one has, for example, infused the tequila with a Triscuit, or shaken it with a tablespoon of all-purpose flour, or served it from of a raw, hollowed-out potato. These are novel ideas and could fall generally under the banner of "creativity," but are also pretty dumb. But you can see how even the non-dumb ones can be over-designed and ultimately wanting: Yes, a Margarita with charred peanut shell-infused tequila, cricket-washed agave, and acid-adjusted wheatgrass might be good, but it's probably not. It's probably just new.



NOTES ON INGREDIENTS



Tequila Ocho, Casa Obsidiana, Cincoro Tequila, El Negocio

The other side of mixological creativity (the aforementioned "hard kind") embraces constraints. Instead of reaching for the obscure, the real challenge is to start with the same ingredients everyone else has, and not only combine them in a new way, but have that new combination be delicious. Much can come from such a

mission—these are the rules that the [Beta Cocktails](#) gentlemen gave themselves, to [bizarre](#) and [wonderful](#) results—and it is with this sensibility that Zachary Gelnaw-Rubin came up with the unlikely combination of [reposado tequila](#), Averna, lemon juice, and maple syrup to make the Debbie, Don't.

The drink appears in [Regarding Cocktails](#), the collection of the late Sasha Petraske's recipes and methods. Petraske is the single most important mixological figure in the last 25 years—he founded the speakeasy Milk & Honey in NYC in 1999, and in doing so created modern cocktail culture as we know it, as well as seeded a handful of other major cities and a dozen or so bars—and it was under his exacting tutelage that many if not most of the neo-classics cocktails were invented: the [Gold Rush](#), the [Penicillin](#), the [Red Hook](#), I mean, it goes on and on. His creative ethos was very much about the hard kind of creativity, about refining the details, perfecting the technique, and creating drinks that were simple, replicable, and exacting.

The story is that Gelnaw-Rubin was working at one of Petraske's bars in the early 2010s, Dutch Kills in Queens, and made Petraske a drink he was working on: He started with [reposado tequila](#), for a vegetal agave note sanded down a bit with a light oaky spice, and combined it with the dark coffee-like bitterness of the Sicilian amaro Averna, the bright tartness of lemon juice and the sweet depth of maple syrup, and gave it to Petraske to try. "He surprised me by telling me it was the best drink I'd ever come up with," recounts Gelnaw-Rubin, with Petraske adding, "if you don't understand why, that's OK."

I wouldn't presume to read Petraske's mind—the entirety of *Regarding Cocktails* is a decoding of, and homage to, the man's genius, and it's worth picking up—but the reason among my favorite drinks, especially this time of year, is its incredible combination of novelty, simplicity, and deliciousness. It's dead simple and has been right in front of us the whole time. It takes a fairly difficult liqueur (Averna) and gets it to play nice in a shaken drink. It's autumnal in its herbal depth, both refreshing and deeply comforting, soaring high and drumming low, and synergizing into more than the sum of its parts. It's the more difficult kind of creative, and all the more satisfying for it.

Debbie, Don't

- 1.25 oz. [reposado tequila](#)
- 1 oz. Averna
- 0.75 oz. lemon juice
- 0.5 oz. maple syrup

Add all ingredients to a cocktail shaker with ice, and give it a long hard shake, 10 to 12 seconds, before straining either up into a coupe or over fresh ice in a rocks glass. Garnish with a lemon peel, a lemon wheel, or nothing at all.

Ratios: The original drink is only 1 oz. of tequila, which I've increased a touch to deal with the sweetness. If I'm wearing a sweater in NYC on a brisk autumn day, I suspect the lingering maple note might be much welcome, but by the normal standards of cocktail balance it's a touch sweet. Feel free to ignore me and bring it back down to 1 oz., but I think amping it up, somewhere between 1 oz. and 1.25 oz. even, retains the charm of the original but helps manage the sweetness.

Reposado Tequila: It's important that the tequila have some age—blanco was good, but too vegetal and uncharming. "Reposado" means rested and it's when a tequila has been aged between 2 to 12 months, just a kiss, just enough to keep the character of the agave but file some of the sharp edges off. Beyond that, try to find one that's additive free, or at least not sweet (celebrity Reposados tend to be sweet). Fortaleza Reposado is the gold standard here, buttery and vanilla-forward without being artificial, but the French oak of Don Fulano or the gentle spice of Tequila Ocho are great, as are the budget end of high-quality like Cimarron, Olmeca Altos, and Real del Valle.

Averna: Averna is such a problem child to mix with (always good, almost never best), it's honestly just a thrill to find a drink that it works with. I tried this with a bunch of its competitors, and it was almost always pretty good—standouts were Ramazotti, for a grapefruit-like texture on the front palate, and Cynar, with a deeper hum of earth and bitterness—but I think Averna was brilliantly chosen, and just right. If you have it, use it.