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Dining - April 14, 2005

## Holy Mole

Ramon Cardenas Jr. may be gone, but Red Iguana remains heavenly—and deliciously dangerous.

by [Ted Scheffler](#)



Ramon Cardenas Jr. was a dangerous man. Red Iguana's extraordinary chef—who passed away in 2004—appeared both menacing and infinitely loveable at the same time. But anyone who could cook like Ramon is dangerous in the way that Hunter S. Thompson was dangerous with a typewriter, or Robert Mitchum was dangerous on the silver screen. Maybe it was Ramon's threatening side that kept me from reviewing the Red Iguana for all these years. I've no doubt that he would have kicked my ass from one side of Salt Lake City to the other if I'd ever critiqued his carnitas. He wasn't shy about voicing his opinions or expressing his will. Maybe that's why I always had an affinity for Ramon's not-so-subtle ways: He lived large.

I was reminded how much we all miss Ramon Jr. at a Los Lobos concert last month. During the show, the band expressed their thanks and tribute to Ramon and the Cardenas family and to everyone at the Red Iguana. It's where Los Lobos' eats when they're in town; they've even autographed the walls of the place. And it occurred to me at the Los Lobos show that I'd never reviewed the Cardenas family's 20 year-old main attraction for Mexican food. That's certainly not because I don't like it. I'm pretty sure that if I add up all the meals I've eaten in Utah restaurants, I've eaten more of them at the Red Iguana than at any other. And I'd be surprised if any Utah restaurant has won more awards for their food than the Red Iguana. Like the masses who line up each day for lunch and dinner, I'm a fan.

When Ramon and Maria Cardenas opened the Red Iguana in 1985, they couldn't possibly have imagined the success that was to come. The Red Iguana is now busier at 3:45 on a

Monday afternoon than most restaurants are on Friday night. Red Iguana patrons are lasting and loyal. But despite the colorful décor and excellent service, it's the food at the Red Iguana that keeps bringing people back, again and again.

I doubt I've ever had an out-of-town visitor that I didn't treat to a meal at the Red Iguana, either on the way to or coming home from the airport. And when I think of unique restaurants that I like to show out-of-towners—spots like Grappa, Metropolitan, La Caille, Log Haven and the New Yorker—it's the Red Iguana that for me best captures Utah's vibrancy. Sure, I think there are places to eat that are more authentically Mexican, like the taco carts on State Street. But no restaurant in Utah captures the spirit of Mexico and of Chicano America like the Red Iguana. It's for good reason that the Red Iguana is Los Lobos' restaurant of choice.

Don't let the lines scare you away. The Red Iguana now has a 90-person seating capacity in three rooms, although I could swear they squeeze twice that number in on weekends. The wait for a table is rarely more than 20-30 minutes, thanks in part to manager Elizabeth Lopez' deft crowd control capabilities. Quick and efficient table service (but never hurried) from outstanding servers like Cecilia and Gerardo helps move things along too. Plus, you'll meet folks in line at the Red Iguana likely to become lifelong friends. It's that type of crowd.

The menu at the Red Iguana is so extensive that it would take a column six times the length of this one to really do it justice. So I'll just say this: I've never had a meal at the Red Iguana that I didn't like. Still, I do have a few favorites. To me, the best Red Iguana dish is anchoite-basted pork loin called "cochinita pibil" (\$10.35). It's a huge serving of moist and tender shredded roast pork with a slight smoky barbecue flavor, perfect for making your own tacos with the corn and flour tortillas provided. Running a close second of my favorite Red Iguana dishes are the carnitas (\$9.95), big chunks of roasted pork, somewhat drier and less-seasoned than the cochinita pibil, but absolutely marvelous nonetheless, served with fresh guacamole, pico de gallo, luscious refried beans and tortillas. I used to favor the carnitas at another Mexican eatery in town, but lately I've been won over by the Red Iguana's.

The tender chunks and shreds of top sirloin bathed in a rich pasilla, cascabel and New Mexico chile sauce (with lots of bay leaves) called Chile Colorado is another slam-dunk winner; just be sure to ask for an extra serving of tortillas to soak up all that dark, rich-tasting Colorado sauce. And for anyone eschewing meat, chile rellenos (\$8.50) at the Red Iguana are outstanding: a plate of two mild Anaheim green chile peppers stuffed with Monterey Jack cheese and fried in an egg batter—yummy!

But for way south-of-the-border flavors, the real draw at the Red Iguana are the Oaxacan-style "moles," most of which have been passed down from generations of Cardenas'. Each Red Iguana "mole" is irresistible—Coloradito, amarillo, negro, poblano, pipian, verde—but for the most complex taste treat try the "lomo de puerco en mole de Almendras" (\$12.95), which is fruit-stuffed pork loin topped with a wonderful almond "mole" made from Maria Cardenas' original recipe blending guajillo and poblano chiles. Que bueno!

There's a sense at the Red Iguana that customers are all an extension of the Cardenas family, which is perhaps why we all miss Ramon so much. But in this 20th anniversary year

of the Red Iguana, Ramon's presence and spirit is still everywhere. He'd be happy to know that the food at the Red Iguana hasn't lost its dangerous edge.

### **THE RED IGUANA 736 W. North Temple, 322-1489. Open for lunch & dinner daily**

- Breakdown lane of the information highway note: A massive home computer meltdown recently resulted in the loss of each and every e-mail message (as well as names and addresses) on my hard drive. So any "Food Matters" information sent to me via e-mail by restaurateurs or readers prior to this week has been irretrievably lost.
- For the four or five City Weekly readers who have yet to visit the Red Iguana, it's a feast and a circus and a carnival for the eyes all wrapped up together. Subtle is not a word I'd use to describe the décor: bright lime and orange walls, boldly colored vinyl tablecloths with flower patterns, and even loud-hued shirts on the servers to match the walls. But maybe the most interesting visual aspect of the Red Iguana is outside. The exterior walls of the Red Iguana (now painted yellow) feature a unique type of masonry popular in the 1950s called skintle. To the untrained eye, the exterior of the restaurant might just look like sloppy mortar work. But the look is intentional. At the Red Iguana, the mortar between bricks was applied with sufficient volume so that the excess sort of oozed out between the bricks, giving the walls a more textured and three-dimensional appearance. Check them out the next time you're waiting in line for a table outside the Red Iguana.
- On Sunday, April 17 at 7 p.m., Keith Chan will host a "Springtime in Sonoma" wine dinner at Monsoon Thai Bistro. Pairings for the six-course dinner include crab, apple and cilantro spring roll with Clos du Bois Reserve Chardonnay; papaya salad paired with Seghesio Pinot Grigio; and Hartford Pinot Noir with grilled salmon in yellow curry. The cost is \$20 per person and \$20 for the optional wine pairings. Phone 583-5339 for information and reservations.
- Quote of the week: Food is a weapon.

—Maksim Litvinov

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