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Food & Wine

Restaurant Review

Red Iguana

by Vanessa Chang

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Go to Red Iguana on a Saturday night and you'll encounter massive hordes waiting for a coveted floral vinyl-topped table. Try your luck on a Thursday or Monday night and it's the same. You'll have to wait in the margins of the main dining room, pretending not to stare at the lucky bastards who already have platters of nightly specials and Ramon's fish tacos. This place is always packed. Yet, the suffering doesn't last very long—you usually never end up waiting for more than half an hour before sitting down to possibly some of the best Mexican food in the region.

For those whose palate for Mexican food formed from drive-thru windows and insistence on mild everything, this may be a literal culture shock. But the Cardenas family rewards you with satisfying creations carrying the self-branded title of "imperial Aztec cuisine." Though flashy and exotic to eyes, ears, and mind, it bears no resemblance to haute cuisine and all its trappings. It is the humblest of culinary pleasures—celebratory eats for some, unequivocal comfort food for others.

To sit in the dining room is to submerge in the cacophony that is uniquely Red Iguana. Like being in the middle of huge bubbling pot of posole, you churn in the energy of diverse patrons, the crack and sizzle of plates hot from the line, and the efficient-but-frantic pace of the servers. Visually, the interior is as much a feast as the food. There's nary a white wall in sight; they're all covered with intense hues, regional Mexican craftsmanship, autographical graffiti of celebrity diners, and photos of the late Ramon Cardenas, Jr. A combination of low-lighting, red walls, and pierced-tin votives make for an almost transcendental experience, a color-saturated mellow acid trip that's highlighted with the incredible cuisine the kitchen manages to churn out each and every night.

A lot of the menu is familiar for those who enjoy Mexican food. The real gems, however, are in items lesser known to the average diner's repertoire. Bites of cochinita pibil (shredded roasted pork basted with achiote) and pescado a la Veracruzana (a fish of the day sprinkled with sesame seeds, paprika, sautéed and served with a tomato-based sauce of chile guero, garlic, oregano, and green olives) attest to the title "imperial Aztec cuisine." If you're molecularly curious, ask for a sampler and you'll get a smattering of each in a lovely color wheel. From there you can gather how much spice you can handle with chicken, pork, or turkey. Amarillo is a spice-freak's delight with enough potency to induce sweating with one whiff. On the other end of the spectrum, the red pipian is delightfully sweet, redolent with peanuts, pumpkin seeds, and chiles. The negro is a favorite, imbued with smoky chiles, fennel seeds, and Mexican chocolate, especially when doused over pockets of refried beans and corn tortillas as

in the enmoladas. If history had a flavor, surely this would be it. My dining companion is a champion of the enchiladas suizas that boasts a beautiful texture and flirtatious play between the sweet heat of the mole poblano and the cooling kiss of sour cream and avocado. And it would be sacrilege to pass a meal without a cold Dos Equis or Modelo.

For dessert, flan is dense and rich in a pool of thin caramel sauce. The addictive tres leches cake looks unassuming, but the sweet condensed milk in its crumbs elevate to ethereal standards.

The only drawback (other than everyone wanting to eat here at the same time, all the time) is that the service can sometimes be harried. Turnover is key here. But with polite words (“No, I am not done, thank you.”) or a passive-aggressive look (“Bitch, don’t touch my mole!”), you can re-set the pace and savor the food.