

The West Side's 'Red Iguana' Considered Best Mexican Restaurant in Utah

By Norma Hendrickson

Red Iguana calls itself home of killer Mexican food. Judging from the awards it has captured, it seems to be killer of all the competition as well. The orange and lime green walls are covered with plates, plaques and magazine articles touting this unassuming eatery as "Best Mexican in Utah" year after year.

How does the little café blow out all the competition? At first glance, it may look like something only a mother could love, but judging from the lines of eager patrons lined up out the door, it's the darling of an extended adoptive family. We asked diners the secret of Red Iguana's success.

The main secret, obviously, is the food. Aj and Raki Pai moved to the avenues a week ago from New Mexico and they've already eaten here twice. They enjoyed the fajitas, enchiladas verdes and



Carmen Hernandez, Estevan Ramirez, and Lydia Lettig have all worked at the Red Iguana for years. They say the food, customers and management keep them there.

Photo by Norma Hendrickson

the salsa. They rated the flan as the best they'd ever tasted. "The food is as authentic as it gets," said Aj Pai. The couple also gave Iguana high marks for inexpensive quality food and outstanding customer service.

The family recipes were passed from founders Maria and Ramon Cardenas to their son, Ramon, Jr., who was chef until his death in 2002. Daughter Lucy now oversees the family business and credits the loyal staff of 53,

which she calls family, with keeping things going during the difficult transition. Chef Ramirez and servers Lydia Lettig and Carmen Hernandez have all worked here 14 years or more and say they love the food, the customers, the bosses—everything.

Lucy worried they'd never survive without her brother, but customers and food critics agree that the chefs, Estevan Ramirez and Luis Heredia, have kept the killer recipes intact. They had both worked with Ramon Jr. and mastered the moles. These concoctions, Lucy explained, are seven rich spicy sauces that are the signature menu item at the Red Iguana. "We're not afraid to throw spices at you," she said.

Today's customers include airline mechanic David Borre, who is stationed in Denver, but comes here each time he gets to Salt Lake; visitor Stan Briggs who will likely eat here three days in a row, and loves his hotel con-

cierge for telling him about the place; and Delta Center workers who come here for their weekly Mexican fix. Keith Eagan comes for lunch once a month and suggests you arrive by 10:45 a.m. to beat the lunch rush. Others say don't let the lines scare you; the place seats 90 people and the wait is usually under 30 minutes.

Red Iguana, 736 W. North Temple, opens at 11 a.m. weekdays and 10 a.m. weekends. For history, menu, reviews, and photos, go to www.rediguana.com.