



## HAUTE MEX COMES TO DR. PHILLIPS

*The new Cantina Laredo does an upscale turn on Meso-American favorites.*

BY STEVE BLOUNT • PHOTOGRAPHS BY GREG JOHNSTON

**D**espite having a fair number of residents with Mexican roots, Orlando is curiously short on great Mexican restaurants. There's a scattering of modest (and often muy auténtico) eateries, especially in Seminole County, but few that qualify as upscale. Accordingly, the news that Cantina Laredo recently opened a location on Sand Lake Road just west of Dr. Phillips Boulevard stirred visions of mole and margaritas. The new restaurant is among

some two dozen by Consolidated Restaurant Operations. Their locations – Austin, Boulder, Scottsdale, Naples – give you a good idea of their niche.

The Cantina is on the corner of Sand Lake and Delaggio in a new retail center that also houses Bravo and will soon have a Fleming's. There's a bit of over-the-river-and-through-the-woods as the center is still under construction and lacks signage; suffice to say, the Cantina is on the upper level and offers valet parking,



OPEN YOUR WORLD

Innovative Folding Door Systems  
Endless Possibilities



**Experience our Showroom**

2233 W Fairbanks Ave  
Winter Park, FL  
1 Block East of I4

407.696.3200

**JELD-WEN**  
WINDOWS & DOORS



so you can just drive up and drop off under the covered portico out front. That's going to be nice during the coming monsoons.

The interior immediately sets the tone. Despite the tropical-colored plaster on the outside, the dining room is sleek in an updated, mid-century Modern way: Large blondish wood panels line the walls, and there are brushed metal accents. Marcel Breuer-like chairs upholstered with leather are both stylish and comfortable. The main dining room even has a fireplace in the middle, a nice visual focal point. The sole nod to Southwestern style consists of some pottery and paintings that incorporate turquoise and clay-colored pigments.

The first stop will be dead ahead, once you're in the door: The bar is open on two sides, and it has a short, mirrored back wall stacked with more than 40 different tequilas. The granddaddy of the bunch is Herradura Seleccion Suprema at \$50 a shot, but there are dozens of other bottles to choose from at a variety of price points.

"The signature here is our margarita," says General Manager Jack Hardin. A veteran of Sand Lake's restaurant row and most recently of Morton's The Steak House. Two months into the

## CANTINA LAREDO'S HOMEMADE GUACAMOLE FEATURES SUBTLE LAYERS OF CITRUS AND SPICE.



run, Hardin has the new crew at Laredo cranking. The margarita comes in a heavy Mexican glass, its cobalt-blue rim sparkling with salt crystals. Tasting gingerly (it's a workday after all), the secret to the well-balanced taste is revealed: fresh squeezed lime juice. More tasting ensued. Plenty of Sauza Silver tequila in there, too, but you wouldn't know it from the taste. It's sneaky, like the big bad wolf hiding under the downy comforter at grandmother's house. Pure velvet on the tongue concealing a wallop for the brain. Very nice.

The extensive tequila menu is complemented by a modest wine selection. Honestly, some of the dishes would pair nicely with the Jordan Chardonnay or Cabernet, but if you're going Mexican, seriously consider a margarita or – even better – a Negra Modelo, Dos Equis or Bohemia.

**HUE**

A RESTAURANT

407.849.1800 629 E Central Blvd  
progressive american

**CITYFISH**  
RESTAURANT

407.849.9779 617 E Central Blvd  
neighborhood seafood

*citrus*  
RESTAURANT

407.373.0622 821 N Orange Ave  
regionally inspired new american

**KRES**  
STEAKHOUSE

407.447.7950 17 W Church St  
contemporary steakhouse & lounge



**URBANlife**

MANAGEMENT  
RESTAURANT GROUP

urbanlifemanagement.com

downtown orlando  
**eat, drink & be local**



The other signature is the house Top Shelf Guacamole, prepared tableside. The server brings a tray loaded with plump, cordovan-colored Hass avocados, chopped tomatoes, whole limes, fresh jalapenos and the secret spice blend. These are quickly assembled into some of the best guacamole I've ever had – including my own homemade. Unlike the pre-packed green paste that passes for guacamole in some quarters, this is chunky with subtle layers of citrus and spice. And a nice little kick.

We followed up our guacamole with ceviche, a nouvelle take on the traditional escabeche common on Mexico's east coast. The background for this appetizer is a sort of pico de gallo – chopped fresh tomatoes and onions seasoned with lime juice and cilantro – with the addition of sliced green olives, shrimp, scallops and fish. Served cold, the shrimp were soft, the scallops firm and the mini-Mars-Bar sized squares of tilapia piquant from the acidic lime juice.

A botanas platter followed: a strip of churrasco-style flank steak supporting twin skewers threaded with red bell pepper, onion, mushroom and topped with grilled shrimp. The churrasco was lightly marked, tender and flavorful with a nice bit of pink in

SEASONALLY DESIGNED

# fresh

DEFINED

**ORLANDO**  
At the Plaza Venezia  
407.354.5212

**ALTAMONTE SPRINGS**  
By the Altamonte Mall  
407.767.1252

**NOW OFFERING  
GROUP & EVENT DINING**

RESERVATIONS WELCOME  
[WWW.SEASONS52.COM](http://WWW.SEASONS52.COM)

the center. A cup of queso and a pair of jalapeno poppers – crispy, crunchy outside and creamy inside – accompanied the steak, but the stars of this assemblage were a pair of tacos al pastor. Traditionally, pastor would be made with pork roasted on a vertical grill, such as lamb for a gyro – a gift to Mexico from its Lebanese immigrants – but Cantina Laredo makes its al pastor with pork sautéed in garlic and spice wrapped in a double layer of crepe-like corn tortillas. The pork was tender and moist; the garlic soft enough not to overwhelm the pork.

I had checked out the menu online ahead of time, and it was the next dish that intrigued me most. Called Camaron Poblano Asada, it's a poblano pepper stuffed with melted Monterrey Jack cheese, shrimp, mushrooms and onions. The stuffed pepper is then wrapped with a steak. First, this thing is a big, melty cheese bomb, so be prepared. Second, the textural contrast – creamy cheese, firm but tender shrimp, the soft poblano pepper and tender beef – almost makes it three dishes in one. The flavors blend together smoothly, and while it takes a bit of finesse to get a perfect cross section, the effort is well worth it, the creamy center and soft pepper playing off of the beefy, savory spiced steak.



*An Evening at the Palace*  
**UCP of Central Florida's 16th Annual Gala**

UCP would like to thank the following table and production sponsors for helping raise more than \$200,000 toward support, education and therapy services for children with special needs. With more than 600 guests, this year's gala was a huge success.

	<p><b>Platinum Sponsors</b>          Baterbys Art Auction Gallery          Fishback Dominick          Harriett Lake          Orlando Magic Ltd.          VineOne Wine Company</p>	<p><b>Gold Sponsors</b>          Darden Restaurants          Schenkel Shultz          Tavistock Financial Corporation</p>	
<p><b>Production Sponsors</b></p>	<p><b>Diamond Sponsors</b>          ABC Fine Wine &amp; Spirits          Bags &amp; Cars Inc.          Charles Bailes, III &amp; Jess Bailes          Jackie &amp; Charlie Bailes          Circle K          Dr. Phillips Inc.          The Glassman          J. Rolfe Davis Insurance          Carolyn &amp; John Lord          R.A. Rogers Construction Co.          Schuff Steel Atlantic          Southern Wine &amp; Spirits          Charitable Foundation Inc.          Walt Disney World Co.</p>	<p><b>Silver Sponsors</b>          Bank of America          BlueCross and BlueShield of Florida          Central Florida Research Park          CH2M Hill          CIGNA HealthCare of Florida          E&amp;J Gallo Winery/Premier Beverage Co.          Florida Hospital Medical Centers          Holland &amp; Knight, LLP          Law Offices of Todd Long          The Lee Foundation          Mike Meadors          Dom &amp; Kalani Meffe          Nemours          Pernod Ricard, USA          R.D. Michaels Inc.</p>	<p>Republic National Distributing Company          Rosen Hotels &amp; Resorts          UCF Foundation Inc.          United Healthcare          Universal Orlando Resort          Valencia Community College          Vestal &amp; Wiler, CPA's          Tom &amp; Penny Yochum</p>

*Thanks for your support!*

MOTHER'S DAY, MAY 10<sup>th</sup> - 11:30AM to 4:30PM

## Mother's Day Brunch

Featuring Live Jazz Entertainment  
and a Fabulous Brunch Menu

### In The Tropicale Restaurant at the Caribe Royale Orlando.

A Variety of Mixed Greens, Fruits, Vegetables & Pasta Salads  
Imported & Domestic Cheeses, Dried Fruits & Nuts  
Shrimp Cocktail, Seafood Salad, Fresh Sushi & California Rolls  
Poached Whole Salmon & Smoked Seafood Platter  
Waldorf Salad  
Freshly Baked Bread Display

---

Eggs Benedict  
Center Cut Bacon & Sausage Links  
Design-Your-Own Omelet & Waffle Stations  
Red Potato Wedges tossed in Cajun Spices  
and Sautéed Onions

---

Carved Smoked Pork Loin  
Beef Short Ribs simmered in a Red Wine Sauce  
Three Cheese Ravioli tossed in a Tomato Basil Cream Sauce  
Horseradish Crusted Salmon pan seared and topped  
with a White Wine Butter Sauce  
Sautéed Chicken Tenderloin topped with a Fresh Tomato and  
Cilantro Concasse  
And much more...

---

A Lavish Display of Desserts prepared  
by our Pastry Chef

\$39 Adults  
\$14 Children Ages 6-12\*

 **CARIBE ROYALE**  
ALL-SUITE HOTEL  
& CONVENTION CENTER  
ORLANDO



\*Children under 5 Eat Free.

Reservations Recommended:  
407.238.800 Ext. 8020

8101 World Center Drive, Orlando, FL 32821

www.cariberoyale.com

(The Venetian Room will be closed on Mother's Day)



We also weighed in on the combination Laredo Platter, a featured selection on the dinner menu. This included a nice chicken tamale with mole sauce – very subtle with just the right dusty notes from the mole – and an excellent chile relleno.

I was told by a reliable source – a friend who coincidentally turned up to have lunch while I was eating – that the flan is also excellent, but frankly, by this time, there was no more room at the inn, and we skipped dessert.

How's the Cantina going over?

So far, Arnold Palmer has stopped by with friends, and Hardin was happy to get a photo taken with Rocco Mediate during the recent Arnold Palmer Invitational at nearby Bay Hill.

The back of the restaurant has a long, covered patio adjoining the development's bricked plaza, the center of which is an enormous fountain graced with figures of Neptune and the Nereids styled after the Fontana del Nettuno in Rome's Piazza Navona. The pleasant setting and the weekly ladies' night (Thursday) help explain the restaurant's volume. "We serve 1,700 margaritas a week," Jack Hardin says. "And we serve more Top Shelf Guacamole than any of the other five restaurants in Florida."

The other piece of the puzzle is likely the ingredients. Chef Edward Ledford is emphatic about freshness.

"We make everything – including the sauces – fresh every day," he said. "We estimate what we're going to serve that day and prepare enough for that. At the end of the night, anything that's left over is thrown away."

Ledford works local suppliers into the mix wherever he can. The poblano peppers I had were local, and the fish comes in daily from Tampa.

In addition to the inviting patio, there's a 30-seat private dining room complete with computer-equipped flat screen for meetings, and Hardin is all set to rope off the plaza, set up some margarita machines and party hard for Cinco de Mayo. There's even a tequila dinner – top-flight foods accompanied by high-end liquors – coming up in June.

Altogether, Orlando's Cantina Laredo is off to a good start, echoing the "thumbs up" critics around the state have given to its other Florida locations. Now if we can just get them to give up the recipe for that guacamole.