

Las Vegas Magazine

Bold Moves

Chef Richard Sandoval's creations make Isla one of the best bets for Mexican on the Strip

By Jack Houston

Photos by Beverly Poppe



Steak pyramid

Like the landmass that shares its name, Isla Mexican Kitchen is an island of bold flavors and inventive culinary creations, rising up from the corner of the casino floor at Treasure Island to tantalize the tastebuds with south-of-the-border fare and freewheeling margaritas. Chef Richard Sandoval, known for New York's Maya and Pampano, among a growing legion of restaurants from Denver to Dubai, lends his impressive credentials to Isla, aided by Jeffrey Beers' modern cantina design and the lubrication of more than 100 tequilas.

Come early for dinner and Isla's lounge may already be packed with early birds clamoring for Mojito Magicos (a tequila- and mint-fueled excursion) and chipotle adobo guacamole, which tops creamy avocado with toasted pumpkin seeds and steamy chipotle sauce. Red, blue and yellow abstract paintings line the walls of the sweeping dining room inside, which benefits from an open kitchen and sleek wood appointments.

Chef Sandoval was born in Mexico City, raised partly in California and studied at the Culinary Institute of America in New York, so his dishes can take a more uptown flair,

hence flourishes like pumpkin seeds in guacamole. Calamar Azteca finds the ancho chile-crusted cephalopods piled high over a citrusy Mexican slaw, doing away with the breadiness that often plagues these dishes and adding a lighter, spicier touch. Isla's masa cakes, or sopes, are mini corn cakes topped with chicken or carne asada and a decadent crema—they deserve to be savored but will probably be devoured.



Pork carnitas

One of Isla's most enduring dishes is the steak pyramid, not so much a pyramid as a picturesque tower of alternating slices of grilled onion, tomato and marinated skirt steak topped with guacamole. It's almost a shame once you have to dig in and ruin the chef's artwork, but that feeling soon gives way to unadulterated bliss as the contrasting flavors and textures play off one another. New to the menu is pork carnitas, tender cuts of pork marinated in orange and beer and slow-roasted, then served with black bean puree, Mexican rice and warm tortillas. (Making tacos is all but implied.)

Another new dish, the guajillo-chile marinated grilled salmon rivals the pork carnitas, hitting the tongue with a flaky awesomeness. Grilled chipotle shrimp deserve some recognition, too, as well as the signature fajita platter with either grilled chicken or filet tips. For dessert, head for the caramel crêpes topped by a dollop of cinnamon ice cream or the house-made churros drizzled in a cajeta sauce, a favorite in Mexico. Afterward, just sit back and marvel all that has been consumed and raise a toast to Chef Sandoval, wherever he may be cooking.

Treasure Island

4-10 p.m. daily; lounge 11 a.m.-2 a.m. Sun., 1 p.m.-2 a.m. Mon.-Thurs., 11 a.m.-3 a.m. Fri.-Sat. 866.286.3809