

CARLOS O'KELLY'S

BY RICH BELMONT

Carlos O'Kelly's is a curious name for a Mexican restaurant, isn't it? Well, not really when you consider this restaurant does not serve Mexican food as defined as the food of Mexico. The people who love Carlos O'Kelly's go there often because it serves New Mexico cuisine, the regional style of cooking of the US state of New Mexico.

Darrel and David Rolph started in the restaurant business as Pizza Hut franchisees in Coralville, IA and formed their parent company Sasnak Management in 1975. Even though they were making pizzas Darrel had a passion for Santa Fe style cooking. He was always inspiring his cooks to try new recipes for food we now call the cuisine of New Mexico.



So it was no surprise when the brothers opened their first Carlos O'Kelly's in Marion, IA in 1981 and their second one in Iowa City in 1982. Today, Sasnak Management is run by Co Founder and Chairman David Rolph, and his son Jon Rolph, President. They currently operate 21 Carlos O'Kelly's restaurants serving inspired Mex in several states including Nebraska, Kansas, Minnesota, Wisconsin, Iowa and Virginia.

New Mexican cuisine is not the same as Mexican or even Tex-Mex foods preferred in Texas and Arizona. Perhaps one of its most defining characteristics is the dominance of several varieties of New Mexican chili peppers which are either red or green depending on their stage of ripeness when picked. Carlos O'Kelly's only uses Hatch Green Chilies grown in the Hatch Valley along the Rio Grande River near Hatch, New Mexico. Most of the varieties of chilies cultivated in the Hatch Valley have been developed at New Mexico State University over the last 130 years.

Another attribute of Santa Fe cooking is the liberal use of Chili Con Queso. When New Mexicans refer to chili they are talking about spicy peppers or sauce made from those peppers, not the concoction of spices, meat and/or beans known as Texas Chili-Con Carne. Chili con Queso is actually a yellow cheese and chili pepper dip. Other notable features of the cuisine are more expensive cuts of beef, burgers, pastas, potatoes and lots of yellow cheese instead of white.

The Dubuque Carlos O'Kelly's opened in November, 1999. John Digman was there right from the start. He helped open the store and was Kitchen Supervisor for one year, then Kitchen Manager for another year. He was promoted to General Manager and sent to the Waterloo location for two years. He returned to Dubuque and has now been the Dubuque restaurant's General Manager for 12 years.

This is a great place to go for Happy Hour from 3 to 6 pm Monday through Friday; appetizers are half-priced, 22 ounce domestic draft beers are \$2, premium and import drafts are \$2.50 and Jumbo Margaritas are only \$3.00!



In fact, Margaritas are a house specialty. Choose the 12 oz. Mugo'Rita; classic 16 oz. Real Gold Tequila and Legendary Mix; or the Legendary Large Jumbo. Order Lemon-Lime,

Raspberry, Orange-Mango or Strawberry and have one your way: neat, on the rocks, frozen, salted or unsalted.

I recommend you try one of the hand-shaken Margaritas made with your choice of 100% Blue Agave (ah-GAH-vay) premium tequilas like Don Julio Blanco, Sauza Tres Generaciones or Patrón Añejo. I prefer mine straight up with salted rim.



The appetizers are a great way to begin a fiesta New Mexican style. They are all rather large and shareable. The Loaded Nachos are corn chips topped with made-from-scratch refried beans and ground beef garnished

with jalapeños, sour cream and fresh made guacamole. The Naked Nachos Grande is the same thing only the tortilla chips are served on the side: good for carry-out orders because the chips don't get soggy.

By the way, did you know refried beans are never twice fried? Most of the time the beans are not fried at all. The name refers to sometimes red or black beans but usually pinto beans that are possibly fried or baked but almost always stewed. The name is based on a mistranslation: in Mexican Spanish the prefix "re" is an informal emphasis meaning "very" or "well" which has been confused with the English "re" indicating repetition. Therefore frijoles refritos actually means well-fried beans not fried-again beans and is still a misnomer since frying is not the usual cooking method. At Carlos O'Kelly's the pinto beans are particularly tasty because they are stewed then mashed with special seasonings and even a little bacon.



The Fajita Cheese Crisp is excellent! A fried flat flour tortilla is coated with butter and garlic sauce, topped with delicious grilled fajita chicken and Monterey Jack cheese, baked pizzeria style, then garnished with tomatoes and chives.



There are so many wonderful entrées to choose from and I can only mention a few. El Guapo's Brisket Tacos are sensational. Two flour tortillas are placed in a taco stand, and then filled with roasted Mexican Beef Brisket, Monterey Jack, diced Poblano and Hatch Green Chilies and Poblano Cream Sauce. The sauce is made in-house from chopped

poblano peppers, cilantro, sour cream, butter and milk. The tacos are oven-baked and the resulting cheese crisps on top are just outstanding. El Guapo means "The Handsome One" and the name is meant to honor the late Darrel Rolph. I suppose I should not mention it was also the name of the bad guy in the 1986 Three Amigos movie!



The Shrimp, Chicken or Steak Picados (pee-cod-os) are very popular dishes. These are grilled with sautéed green peppers and onions and melted Monterey Jack. The chicken has a butter garlic sauce, the grilled skirt steak is placed in an oven with Chipotle Diablo sauce and the shrimp is blended with Poblano Cream Diablo sauce.

Did I mention the sauces are first class? Diablo is a butter garlic sauce laced with Chipotle peppers and Fuego is a tomato based hot sauce (Fuego means fire) containing atomic salsa.

The Fiesta Sampler and the Cinco Sampler are delightful opportunities to experience a myriad of flavors. I like the Fiesta because it includes a Beef Chimichanga with Red Enchilada Sauce, a Pulled Chicken Enchilada with Poblano Cream Sauce, a Ground Beef Enchilada with Cheese Enchilada Sauce and a Ground Beef & Bean Tostada.



As much as I like the Sampler I just love the Burro En Fuego. The Spanish translates to "Donkey on Fire". Mexican Beef Brisket is rolled in a large flour tortilla with Spicy Fuego

Sauce and topped with more Fuego Sauce and sour cream. It comes with 2 sides: Black Beans, Traditional Mexican Rice, Cantina Fries or Papas O'Kelly. Papas is the Mexican Spanish word for potatoes and these are mashed with a fabulous 4-cheese blend.



Do you recall I said New Mexican cuisine even includes burgers and pastas? So how about a Cantina Burger of two quarter-pound patties layered with Chili con Queso, sautéed onions, bell peppers and topped with fried jalapeño bites and thick sliced bacon? Or Pasta Diablo: grilled chicken mixed with rotini pasta, green peppers, onions and Diablo Sauce and topped with Monterey Jack cheese, tomatoes, chives and sour cream?



Carlos O'Kelly's Fajitas are more examples of legendary New Mexican cooking. The Prairie Fire Fajitas are either grilled chicken or marinated top round steak (not the typical tougher skirt or flank steak) basted in chipotle sauce and served on red and green bell peppers, yellow and red onions and immensely flavored with a proprietary blend of

seasonings. The Shrimp Fajitas contains a large number of broiled Chipotle-basted shrimp served sizzling with fajita veggies on the side and garnished with Southwest Slaw, lettuce, jack cheese and Pico de Gallo.

The Delight Size items on the back of the menu are smaller, lunch size portions of most of the dinner entrées.



Desserts include typical Mexican Fried Ice Cream and Brownie with Ice Cream and Fudge. These are good but I definitely recommend you stick with the New Mexican cuisine favorites of Cheesecake Empanadas

(ehm-pah-NAH-das) fried pastries with cheesecake filling or Sopapillas (soap-ah-pee-yas) which are fried pastry pillows with a hint of honey and cinnamon.

Carlos O'Kelly's is intricately involved in Dubuque Community events. It is partnering with Resources Unite for the Foster Care Families of Dubuque Christmas Dinner. It is also hosting the annual Toy Drive benefitting the Dubuque Community YWCA Shelter. And it is especially honored to be donating and preparing food for the Donna Ginter Annual Thanksgiving Dinner.

Now that it's cold outside there is no better time to visit Carlos O'Kelly's. As soon as you taste your first Margarita close your eyes and suddenly you are in cozy warm Santa Fe, New Mexico!

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1355 Associates Drive, Dubuque, IA 52002

563-583-0088 • CarlosOKellys.com

Facebook.com/CarlosOKellys

Hours: Sun-Wed: 11 AM-9 PM; Thu-Sat: 11 AM-10 PM

Dining Style: Casual • **Noise Level:** Conversational

Recommendations: Jumbo Margaritas; Loaded Nachos; Fajita Cheese Crisp; Chicken Fiesta Salad; El Guapo's Brisket Tacos; Fiesta Sampler; Burro En Fuego; Seafood Enchiladas; Prairie Fire Steak Fajitas; Shrimp Fajitas; Shrimp Picado; Sopapillas, Empanadas

Liquor Service: Full Bar; Legendary Margaritas

Prices: Lunch: \$5.99-\$12.99; Dinner: \$7.99-\$14.99

Pay Options: Cash, Check, Debit, Visa, MasterCard, AMEX, Discover

Accessibility: Front Door & Restrooms

Kids Policy: Menu; High Chairs; Boosters. Kids eat for half-price on Tuesdays

Reservations: Call ahead for groups of 6 or more

Catering: Yes • **Take Out:** Yes • **Delivery:** No

Parking: Large Private Lot