

# IRON CHEF SCOTT'S THOUGHTS ON THE WORLD

June 28, 2010

## An evening at Red Lobster

On Thursday night, I got a chance to officially meet the mastermind behind Red Lobster's food, Chef Michael LaDuke. It turned out to be a quiet dinner for three bloggers (of which Jennifer is much more prolific than I am, but I got to go along as the plus one), two publicists, and one head chef.



I had never been to Red Lobster before meeting Jennifer 3 and a-half years ago. To be honest, I never really wanted to go to a place that my dad often referred to as the "Red Blobster". On its own, that was generally enough to turn me off to it. But, when you pair that with remembering commercials that prominently feature fried shrimp, it was just never somewhere I really wanted to have a full meal. However, I thought I would give the dinner, and a trip through the menu, a try.

So, we battled through a Thursday night rush hour to get down to Bloomington about 10 minutes early and were taken to a table with the chef. While the other bloggers arrived, we had our chance to get to know Chef Michael. At this point, it is still the usual “Where are you from?” (Orlando, but born in upstate NY), “Where have you cooked?” (17 years at Disney, and now 5 at Red Lobster), and “Do you have a family?” (Married, with 1 boy and 1 girl). By this time, everybody had arrived and we were ready to begin our dinner.

We started with one of the oldest items on the menu, the Lobster Pizza. Overall, this dish was pretty good. Pizza crust, lobster meat, mozzarella, tomatoes, basil, and, the most important to me, a squeeze of lemon juice. I say that the lemon was the most important because when I got a bite with the lemon juice, the pizza was very well balanced. However, when I took a bite that didn't have the lemon juice, it was way too salty for me.



Our second dish was the first of the entrees, the Maui Luau Shrimp and Salmon, which, Jennifer and I agreed was probably one of the best dishes we had. We received one filet of salmon, and one skewer of shrimp, both brushed with a sweet and spicy sauce, and then cooked over the ever-important wood-fire grills, which are now standard at all Red Lobsters. This was served with grilled pineapple, broccoli, and the wild rice pilaf. I was perfectly happy with the amount of spice that was in the dish, at least when I used the Thai chili sauce that came with the dish.

Our next dish was the Mango-Jalapeno Shrimp Skewers. These were served with lightly battered onion rings, which I found myself returning to throughout the rest of the meal. There were only two issues that I had with this dish. 1 – I couldn't get the shrimp off the skewers (possibly a user malfunction rather than a food malfunction) and 2 – I could barely taste the jalapeno, so to me, it was just a sweet mango shrimp dish. In all fairness, it was still tasty, but I was hoping for a bit more heat. Of course, from everything that I can tell, I like food a little spicier than the average American, which is who the cooks at Red Lobster are cooking for. When you are cooking for two million Americans per week, it is probably best to shoot for middle of the road.



Next came the one dish we tried for anybody who doesn't care for seafood, the Maple-Glazed Chicken. This is one of the newer additions to the menu, which was developed based on Chef Michael's love of maple syrup. Again, it was served over the wild rice pilaf. I was definitely able to taste the maple in the dish, but often I couldn't taste very much cherry, even when I would have a bite with an entire cherry in it. The dish wasn't bad, considering that people don't go to Red Lobster for the land animals.

The final entrée was the Wood-Grilled Tilapia with Spicy Soy Broth, which was served with oven roasted fresh asparagus, tomatoes, and red onions. And, of course, some more rice pilaf. This was another pretty strong dish. The soy broth had just a hint of wasabi, which gave it a nice little zip. The vegetables were cooked just right, and the whole dish came together nicely. This dish cost \$17.99 and was the most expensive dish that we had that night. For me, that is the upper limit of what I am willing to spend on dinner at a casual chain restaurant. However, it was not the most expensive thing on the menu.

We did have 3 desserts, which I will mention briefly, but not go into much detail about. They were the Chocolate Chip Lava Cookie, the New York Style Cheesecake with Strawberries, and finally the Chocolate Wave (a large slice of chocolate cake). All of them were good, but I did have a bit of an issue with the lava cookie and the chocolate wave. They were HUGE! We had some interesting conversations throughout the night, and the overall health of Americans came up now and again. One of the things that Chef LaDuke said was that “We can’t change how Americans eat. They will eat what they want to”. Which is fine. I, however, believe that he is trying to change how Americans eat. They have recently put in wood-fire grills to all locations. That sounds pretty healthy to me. Also, he mentioned that the menu was down to 18-27% fried now, which is down from previous years. Portions of the entrees were a good size, but not obscene, by any stretch of the imagination. But then to unload these huge desserts came as quite a surprise to me. On the positive side, it sounded like that might be changing in the near future, but we will just have to wait and see.

Overall, my experience at Red Lobster was not at all what I was expecting, and I will probably start to consider it as a possibility for a casual dinner. If you want to find out what Jennifer had to say about the dinner, check out her blog at:

<http://www.aselfconfessedfoodie.com>