

Rule-breaking spirit separates Tamarind Bay from the pack

By Wesley Morris and Amy Graves, September 03, 2004

Indian restaurants in this town are like the good kids at elite prep schools. There are lots of decent places, serving fine-to-amazing food, in pretty much every neighborhood. They're all eager to please and well-behaved, each with a hand up, politely calling, "Ooh, pick me!"

Tamarind Bay is the chick smoking in the girls' room. And that heavy object flying out the restaurant's window is the rule book, which nobody seems to need. (OK, we're exaggerating -- Tamarind Bay is one of those subterranean operations, so barring a reversal in the earth's gravitational pull, nothing's really flying *out* the windows.)

Unfortunately, for now, it's bring-your-own-party at Tamarind Bay, which has a smallish, vibrant dining room. The restaurant used to be home to a dumpy Mexican place whose fiesta spirit is gone too. That ghost just won't haunt. Try as the staff might to use humor (the signs for the tiny and tinier bathrooms give post-prandial touchups a Lewis Carroll charm) and gaffes (our beer was warm) to make things interesting, the menu is more exciting than anybody eating there. On a recent couple of nights, there were boringly smitten people of diverse ages canoodling at tables for two as well as the odd quartet of suits gathered for a business dinner.

The food, however, is ready to play. The action-packed menu prizes complex curiosities and experiments over staples. The biryanis and vindaloos are basically gone, while fenugreek, chilies, and ginger have the run of the place. There's a quail that comes in a night mask of yogurt and caramelized onions; grilled potatoes laced with pomegranate seeds; a plate of cheese-infused button mushrooms; and skewers of breaded and coriander-coated lamb.

The banana dumplings are fried patties from heaven. And when the menu promises that the lentils in the stewy lalla mussa dal were simmered overnight in spices, first you wonder if the fire marshal knows, then you stop caring; it's just that dark and tasty. And speaking of hot, the runaway seasoning in the murg-ki-chaat salad -- chunks of chicken breast with lettuce and other vegetables -- sparked chants of "our mouths are on fire."

The salad came early and had everybody really worried that the hotness of the rest of the meal would do us in. Careful though: The highly attentive staff seems quick to "overhear" complaints and correct them as the entrees keep coming. These last-minute adjustments, by the way, are possible because the improv artists at the stoves, led by executive chef Wali Ahmad, make each meal on its own. None of that "one sauce fits all" stuff here.

Tamarind Bay occupies an unassuming spot at the corner of Winthrop and JFK. That's right across from that parents' weekend inevitability, Bombay Club, which is still unstoppably festive (and unstoppably crowded).

So there are dueling Indian joints in Harvard Square, with Goliath staring down at David, and for now Goliath's winning the social hour, but, as far as the kitchen goes, David has what it takes to win the war.

Tamarind Bay

★★★
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Location: 75 Winthrop Street, Harvard Square / Cambridge; 617-491-4552

Prices: Lunch: prix fixe thali \$6.95 weekdays, \$7.95 weekends.
Dinner: appetizers \$3.50-\$6.50; entrees \$10-\$17; breads \$3-\$4.50; desserts \$4.50.

Hours: Lunch daily: 11:30 a.m.-2:30 p.m. Dinner nightly: 5-10:30 p.m. Reservations accepted.

Credit Cards: American Express, MasterCard, Visa, Discover.

Handicap access: Short flight of stairs down to entrance.