

Indian goes modern

By Alison Arnett, September 30, 2004

We think we know Indian food. We've eaten curries and dal, dabbled in mint chutneys, and enjoyed basketfuls of nan and poori. We've figured out that dosas, those paper-thin crepes, are from the southern part of the country, and moghul sauces are modeled after dishes from the royal courts. We realize that tandoori grilled meats and fish come with slices of lemon and maybe some sliced onion.

We're confident we know Indian, at least until the first bite of Tamarind Bay's bhuna paneer, a firm, mild cheese marinated in coriander and spices and then grilled. The cheese is pale golden with saffron, the spices lively on the tongue, the finely chopped coriander bright green and fresh. The grilling gives the homemade cheese a smoky edge. It's nothing like the pale, flaccid paneer that often is only a sponge for other flavors. This paneer has character.

Rogan josh, a staple on Indian menus, here gets an extra depth of flavor by being made of goat, not lamb, as it probably would be in India, one of the owners tells me in a later phone conversation. I can tell when I'm eating the goat that the deep red and rather oily sauce brims with spices, yet the flavor is intense but not fiery.

The dish, so right for the mountainous and often cold Kashmir region whence it comes, is bold and makes me crave more, until I'm dipping nan into the sauce, chasing the elusive hint of cardamom. Even a dish of chicken, first grilled in the tandoor and then served in a creamy tomato sauce, is so subtly flavorful that it's a revelation.

Tamarind Bay opened in July in the basement space that used to be Casa Mexico in Harvard Square. The intent, says one of the owners, Vic Kapoor, was to showcase what Indian food can be. Rather than the batch system that he says is used in many restaurants -- where base and sauces are made ahead of time and flavored according to the orders coming in, which explains why so many Indian dishes taste the same -- here each sauce is made individually. And rather than an anonymous slate of cooks in the kitchen, Tamarind Bay's chef, Wali Ahmad, who worked for hotels and appeared on Indian television, is not only a name; he also chats with patrons.

Fusion doesn't figure into Ahmad's cooking, and most of the menu is recognizable to anyone who's eaten in one of the many Indian places in Cambridge, Boston, and elsewhere. Kapoor says Tamarind Bay is patterned after the trendsetting Indian restaurants in London, where several have won Michelin stars. The focus here is modern Indian cooking and includes ingredients like scallops, quail, and lobster, items not often seen on Indian menus; Kapoor says the menus will change seasonally, and instead of a buffet table at lunch, a thali, or set menu, is offered.

The wine list offers a good range of bottles, especially in Gewurztraminers and other varieties that pair well with complex spicing. One evening we taste an Indian wine, a Sula Vineyards chenin

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.

blanc, with enough sweetness to go from a spicy-hot okra dish to a much milder one of lamb cooked in spinach and ginger.

That okra dish, called bhindi adraki, is like catnip to me, or to anyone who likes spice, featuring as it does a heady, sharp coating that transforms each firm little bite of fresh okra. As is true at most Indian restaurants, vegetarians can find a range of dishes. Some, like a mix of mushrooms, fresh green peas, and onions in a tomato masala, subtly show off seasonal virtues, while others, like a soupy casserole of black lentils, have more earthy, sustaining tastes.

Distinctive flavors, spices, and ingredients are used in unusual ways. Lamb kebabs are smoked and coated with a spicy coriander topping; it's a lively and unusual twist on tandoori-grilled lamb. Salmon, though, which is also done in the tandoori style, is too dry. And mahi mahi done in a curry-like yellow gravy flavored with carom seeds is also overcooked for my taste. But the carom (also called ajwain) sauce, with a golden color and a pungent, almost pickle-like flavor, is so good that I love the dish anyway.

Only two desserts -- a coconut rice pudding and another of thread-like rice noodles in custard -- are offered, both sweet and pleasant enough, though not exceptional. The breads cover the usual range of poori to paratha to roti, but the best is really the simplest, garlic nan; the others are a little oily.

Eating at Tamarind Bay is an adventure, and mostly a delightful one, but other aspects of dining require some patience. The space is tight in the small basement, making the whole place seem like one communal table. One of the managers can be overheard advising an Indian family next to us to come next time on a weekday night, and the place does seem to have been discovered.

That means cramped conditions, but it can be fascinating as we watch to see what the Indian diners order. This is a young restaurant, so perhaps the service issues -- uneven delivery of dishes from the kitchen, forgotten orders, splashed wine -- will be smoothed out in time. Still, the wait staff and managers are cordial and seem eager. For Indian food this enticing, it's worth a little forbearance.