



Tamarind Bay

Finally, Boston has Indian food to rival London's

BY ROBERT NADEAU



I've been waiting a long time for a restaurant like Tamarind Bay. Specifically, I've been waiting for Indian food that is as good as the idea of Indian food — a cuisine of layered spices enhancing natural flavors. To break up the waiting, I would try to eat in Indian restaurants in London, which are to Indian restaurants in Boston as Technicolor was to black-and-white. But Tamarind Bay generally surpasses the second-tier London Indian restaurants I've been to. On one visit I was not able to review the entire menu. And you must check the entire menu, because each dish is made separately and to order, in contrast to the

usual batch system with permutations of sauce and content. But since all five entrées we tried were knockouts, along with three of four appetizers, it seemed wrong to wait for further detail. Try it, and then e-mail me about how great the other dishes are.

There was some indication that Tamarind Bay would be something special. It was announced with a name chef, Wali Ahmad, and entrée prices we haven't often paid for Indian food. You enter the basement room past bronze-and-copper décor worthy of a Thai restaurant. (In fact, the Buddha who greets you is a copy of a Thai Buddha.)

Ahmad's menu starts off without much variation. There are only six appetizers, but more than 30 entrées, and then only two desserts. The appetizers are not to be missed, however, especially the tomato shorba (\$4.50), a distinctly tomato-flavored soup with a hint of cream and a solid hit of cilantro. Chicken shorba (\$4.50) is more like a Thai soup, with a lemon-coriander flavor, a clear broth, and many small chunks of chicken.

You also won't want to miss the murg-ki-chat (\$6.50), which isn't creamy with yogurt like most chicken-chat dishes in Boston-area restaurants. The yogurt here is a marinade for the tandoori chicken, and the greens are dressed somewhat like a Thai salad, with a strong flavor of lime, onion, cilantro, and red pepper. The only weak appetizer was the most familiar, a greasy pair of vegetable samosas (\$3.50). Even they were rescued considerably by a mild, almost-dry tamarind dipping sauce.

Getting into the tandoor dishes, we tried murg hazarwi (\$15), priced like shrimp for about eight chunks of chicken breast meat. But oh, what flavor! These are reportedly marinated in cream and cardamom. Make that sour cream, I think. In any case, it's a good long soak, and each piece is bursting with sour-spicy overtones, yet actually tastes like chicken.

Lamb chops bhunna masala (\$17.50) are an immediate demonstration of the value of dishes made to order. The three lamb chops are excellent, though a little overdone. But the sauce is a revelation. Sweet and hot spices explode like a meteor shower, but the underlying flavor throughout is a creamy lamb gravy. This dish also gains from its presentation on a long crescent-shaped plate.

Lalla mussa dal (\$11.50) is what vegetarians might eat instead of the lamb. Perhaps it's the carnivores who should be jealous. This is real slow food, tiny black beans simmered overnight in spices to a rich

chocolate-brown stew, very slightly sweet like Dominican red beans. Like most composed dishes, it's served in a brass pot, with another brass pot of impeccable basmati rice. I could live for weeks on nothing else.

Moving up the spice ladder, jhinga meethi (\$16.50) is a splendid stew of quite a few shrimp in a gravy featuring fresh fenugreek leaves. The fresh leaves are one of those indescribable herbs, like cilantro or shiso, but more on the bitter tonic side, while also somewhat piny and aromatic. (The seeds are the maple-like component of commercial curry powder.) This dish also approached the two-chili level of the average Thai menu, which is quite hot, but effective here to open the sinuses for the other spices.

At a full three-chili throttle is the calamari masala (\$14.50), a thick stew of squid, tomato, and onion. This has plenty of hot pepper, amply supported by a synthesis of spices that would be hard to tease out into a list. This is what I always imagined Indian chefs could achieve: spice mixtures so well harmonized that the individual notes are buried in the symphonic effect.

Interestingly, although this was the best Indian dinner our hungry (and experienced) table of four had ever tasted, we left a number of puddles of exquisite sauce at the end. Flavors are so intense that one automatically eats this food somewhat as originally intended — taking small bites as a kind of sauce with a lot of neutral rice or bread. The rice, as mentioned above, is just excellent, aromatic basmati. The breads are not extraordinary. The breadbasket (\$9.50) is topped with half-moons of garlic naan, a puffed flatbread with minced garlic and cilantro on it. Underneath are more-neutral paratha (buttery whole wheat) and roti (slightly less buttery whole wheat).

Drinks include a wine list and Indian beers. The wine list is pretty well thought-out, although no wine is really suited to the spiciness of Indian food. We tried a 2002 Lurton malbec (\$28), an Argentine red with some spice of its own. It was served at room temperature, and tasted good on its own, but didn't have a chance with the food. Beer or lassi (thinned yogurt) would have been better choices. The masala tea (\$2) — the ancestor of chai — was nicely made and a little buttery-rich.

Of the two desserts, a firni (\$4), described as rice pudding with condensed milk and saffron, was actually noodle pudding with condensed milk and no saffron. And malpua (\$4), described as a thin banana pancake served in sweet syrup, was actually a fresh banana pudding without pancake or syrup. While

Indian desserts have never been poised to sweep France, these are rather good little sweets, and perhaps better as served than as described.

This location, formerly occupied by Casa Mexico, is a basement with Lally columns, and always will be. Tamarind Bay has done a good job within that limitation, painting the pillars gold and ragging the walls in a light mustard that keeps the space feeling open. An island of wood panels on the ceiling breaks up the room, which also features bronze wall decorations. Plates use interesting shapes, and the quarry-tile floor has slate and coppery colors. Noise with a full house (as it is always going to be) was not bad, and the snatches of Indian [dance music](#) that came through were fine. The menu's soft spots will all upgrade as the staff masters the complex menu (chef Ahmad wants to import spices for featured dishes, and sell the spices as keepsakes). Service was good, and sensitive to spice levels, but not as well-versed and talkative as the novel food may require.

But none of this atmosphere and service stuff matters, anyway. This is the best Indian food I've ever tasted, and I would go back for more if it were served by robots on TV trays in a falling-rock zone.

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