

## **Tamarind Bay**

75 Winthrop St., Cambridge, 617-491-4552



### **Eatery aspires to bring authentic Indian to Cambridge**

Review by Mat Schaffer

Friday, September 17, 2004

“Have you eaten here before?” asks owner Vikas Kapoor, as he seats a group of diners at Tamarind Bay, his new Indian restaurant in Harvard Square. “This isn’t batch cooking, where they make one gravy for three dishes. This is home-style Indian food. Everything is made to order - with no artificial colors or flavors.”

Tamarind Bay is the love child of Kapoor, who runs an IT services company, and Dr. Aji Kumar, an oncologist. The two friends apparently bemoaned the lack of quality Indian fare in Boston and decided to rectify the situation.

So they imported Wali Ahmad, who worked alongside Indian TV cooking superstar Sanjeev Kapoor on the subcontinent’s most popular television “cooking” show, “Khana Khazana” (Food Treasures). At Tamarind Bay, Ahmad uses Indian spices and local ingredients to revitalize old Indian favorites and create New England-influenced dishes.

It’s lighter and brighter than what you’d expect if you frequent the many Northern Indian (Mogul) restaurants that pepper the Hub, with delightful surprises such as shabnam purluft (\$12.50), cheese-stuffed button mushrooms, napped with a tangy paste of besan (gram) flour and butter. Or aminabadi aaloo (\$12.50/\$8.50), roasted potato, cups of cheese, crunchy dried pomegranate seeds and snipped cilantro. And bhuna paneer (\$12/\$8), cubes of cilantro-painted homemade cheese, baked in the tandoor.

Even a classic such as vegetable samosa (\$3.50), popping with potatoes and peas, gets a remake thanks to the peppery bite of powdered chili. Pass the tamarind chutney when you bite into wedges of flaky dahi kachori (\$5.50), a thin turnover stuffed with smashed legumes.

Writing about Indian food is always a challenge because of its complex spicing. As nice as the staff is at Tamarind Bay (and they’re very nice), they’re less than 100 percent knowledgeable about what they’re serving. Even chef Ahmad, who delivers dishes himself when it’s busy, isn’t as forthcoming as an inquisitive foodie would like him to be about his recipes.

What’s that elusive minty accent in the saag gosht (\$14.50), chunks of lamb stewed meltingly tender in spinach? Ahmad says it’s ground kasoori mehti (fenugreek leaves). Are there tomatoes in the velvety lalla mussa dal (\$11.50), black lentils slow-cooked overnight in the tandoor? Actually, it’s ketchup and a ton of butter and cream.

That savory yellow gravy that accompanies tandoor-roasted scallops (\$16.50)? It’s made of cashews and carom (lovage) seeds. How about the seasonings in the calamari masala (\$14.50), a piquant saute of squid, onions and tomatoes? Chili, coriander and turmeric.

The sweet-and-sour notes in seared konkani lobster tail (\$20.50) are from kokum, a tamarindlike fruit from Gujarat Maharashtra in Southern India. There’s garam masala, a blend of spices usually containing cardamom, cloves, cumin and chili, in faldhi kofta (\$14) - raw banana dumplings the texture of spongy falafel. Chaat masala, like garam, but saltier, is sprinkled on garlicky lahsouni jhinga (\$16.50/\$10), tandoori shrimp.

Even when you’re unable to pinpoint the precise flavorings, Ahmad’s cuisine is certain to intrigue. You’ll love the richness of murgh makhan wala (\$13.50), grilled chicken in tomato and cream sauce, and the oily sweetness of shaahi baigan (\$14), eggplant awash in pureed cashew cream.

Tamarind Bay has a small but smart wine list, but who can resist a refreshingly hoppy 22-ounce Taj Mahal beer (\$6.50) with Indian? Breads - including unusual mint paratha (\$3.50) and sun-dried tomato kulcha (\$3.50) - are expertly prepared.

Desserts (\$4) - such as saffron-intense firni rice pudding and caramel-scented vermicelli in condensed milk - are ultrasweet and less sophisticated than what precedes them. Service, while friendly, is rushed, with courses arriving one upon the other, far too fast for a restaurant of these aspirations.

Located in the old Casa Mexico just off J.F.K. Street, Tamarind Bay is a handsomely appointed basement, decorated in maize and gold with slate floors and striped banquettes. The lovely space is punctuated by pillars that make it difficult to hold a conversation should you and your friends be seated between one. A giant Buddha face greets you at the front door.

Owners Kapoor and Kumar plan to launch a side business selling Indian spices and recipes. Not soon enough. Food this cultured deserves a clientele better educated in the intricacies of subcontinental gastronomy. In a town where Indian restaurants are suddenly hotter than hot, Tamarind Bay debuts as one of the hottest.