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Unexpectedly terrific

Enter the house of prawn pain and other hot and cool delights of Masala Bowl in Artesia.

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EXTRA
Photos
Masala Bowl

At a fast food restaurant, I expect quick service, mediocre (at best) taste and just enough sustenance to fill the void.

I prefer a thoughtful meal, freshly prepared with fine ingredients, metal utensils and nothing resembling an artificially flavored tomato product in a pouch. However, if that's not possible, at least I can recommend a highly identifiable, better than just "good" fast-food experience.

If you've not tried Indian cuisine, the Masala Bowl in Artesia would be a great way to begin. Indian cuisine is among the world's greatest, and for good reason. Like the Chinese, the Indians have been at their stoves for centuries, perfecting a craft that rises to the level of a philosophy. Indian food is as complex and as varied as the human expressions for sadness and joy.

It remains one of my favorites, but it is often thought of as a haven for curry and overly spicy finishes. This is a huge misconception, since much Indian food can be ordered without heat, and very few dishes include the spices that make up what we understand as "curry."

Masala Bowl is owned by CGI Restaurants, which also owns the recently reviewed neighboring vegetarian restaurant Annapurna Express. The owners hope to franchise the dependable, healthy cuisine at both restaurants.

Masala Bowl is cheerful and inviting, with not much in the way of ethnic references. Its nicely done picture menu boards help you with your selections. Entertainment doesn't cost extra, and while waiting for my order, I enjoyed both Tom and Jerry cartoon classics and sultry Indian music videos with enough gyrating to give Madonna a run for her money.

A steam table at the front counter serves patrons smaller portions, with multiple options for quick service. A single entree over rice is \$4, two items are \$5 and three items are \$6.

My two friends and I began with the vegetable samosa appetizer for \$2. We quickly massacred the two impressively sized pastry pillows stuffed with minced chicken, potatoes, peas and delicate spices. The dipping sauces that accompanied the samosas were fresh and tasty. The tamarind sauce was sweet and subtle, while the mint sauce offered a slightly spicier complement.

From the steam table, we had a two-entree plate. The lentils were a tasty preparation of four kinds of beans, boiled first then added to tomato, onion, turmeric, red chilies and whole cumin. Our second item was the chicken tikka masala, which was impressively good. Generous and tender white meat chicken pieces were drowning in a velvety, tomato-based cream sauce with a complex blend of coriander, cumin, paprika, onion and some "jaggery," unrefined whole sugar similar to brown sugar. All of the bowls and plates are served with the steamed white basmati rice.

Masalas are spice blends usually in a tomato or cream-based gravy that are ideal for dipping. My mother would be mortified to watch me greedily dipping and sliding my crisp slices of Indian naan bread, but she wasn't there to scold me. My guests picked up on the dipping and sliding technique, and our foam plates lay bare after the chicken masala.

We ordered multiples of naan, the Indian yeast bread that's slapped against the sides of the hot tandoor oven to cook. This cost only \$2.49 for four large slices. The garlic naan was the clear favorite, with pieces of fresh garlic baked into a crisp golden brown. The plain naan is indeed plain by comparison, but still chewy and delicious. Kashmiri naan reminds me of holiday dessert bread, with an abundance of candied fruit and nuts. Kashmiris dry food throughout the summers in preparation for the brutal winter season, making these ingredients abundant in many dishes like this one.

The pepper lamb for \$7 was fantastic. The lamb was first marinated with red, green and black pepper, then dusted with corn starch and lightly fried to a surprisingly tender and slightly crisp texture. The salt and vinegar added later to the pepper sauce glazed the meat perfectly, and sauteed, julienne peppers gave it a colorful garnish.

We ordered the chicken byrani for \$7 as a complementary rice dish to all of our other entrees. I honestly expected a simple rice blend with little shreds of chicken, as I'm accustomed to, but found instead almost half a cut-up chicken resting on the bottom of the platter.

The secret to this world-famous dish is first cooking the chicken and rice together

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till almost fully done, infusing the full chicken flavor into the basmati, then finishing the rice with clove, cardamom and fresh saffron. Colorful spears of bell peppers are served on top, and there is a side garnish of cool yogurt, cilantro and red onion sauce. Easily a meal in itself, this rice dish was particularly fragrant with an outstanding savory taste.

Chicken tandoori is another of

those recipes that is

wonderful, and also indicative

of the healthy value of certain Indian food preparation. Apparently this way of cooking favored in northwest India, now Pakistan, was unknown even in the rest of India until about 1945, when it made its first appearance in Delhi.

The word tandoor refers to the earthenware oven that the food is cooked in, which is immensely hot and cooks the meat very fast from all sides at once. The important main characteristics of "tandoori," however, are the delicious spice and color. A straightforward mixture of cumin, red pepper, ginger, onion, garlic, salt and a few other spices make up the typical tandoor seasonings. Dishes are bright orange-red and intensely flavored.

For an embarrassingly inexpensive \$6, we received a half, cut-up, tandoor prepared chicken, served with a refreshing spinach salad with fresh mango dressing and garnished with sweet white onions and lemon wedges.

The menu also offers a variety of lighter "wraps." The Malai Tikka Roll for \$6 was the group favorite. "Malai," the chef says, means "creamy," but I am not sure how it applies to this dish. A thinner, naan style bread more like a sandwich bread, cradled a blend of wonderfully spiced ground chicken, lettuce and a hint of mint sauce. It was rolled up tight and secure to hold onto every delicious bite. The combination of tastes together in one bite was just terrific.

The Chili Garlic Prawns (Jhingha) for \$7 was by sheer accident our last dish. This was lucky because it was so high on the heat scale that if we had consumed it early on, it might have killed our palates for the rest of our meal.

As shrimp is one of my most savored of all seafood, it was almost unheard of that I was unable to manage but one of the six plump, jumbo shrimp. The sauce was an engaging, but aural my adventure with a garlic and chili paste of excruciating intensity. I am sure I face better than melting, I would be polished off the remainder. Might I suggest that you state the desired level of heat before ordering this plate?

Aside from the fountain drinks, there were some authentic Indian beverages to quench the pain of the prawns. I chose a bottle of Limca, a cloudy, lemon-flavored soda that vibrated my senses.

Inside a rusty, dusty bottle, I found a citrus drink that reminded me of Fresca, minus the saccharine or chemical taste. It was very light, not too sugary and quite refreshing. I am sure it has absolutely no real fruit juice in it, but I don't care. I liked it, and I'm on the hunt for a six-pack.

Our young server was kind enough to offer us a complimentary mango lassi, which is a subtle but velvety yogurt and mango parfait. It was filling, almost serving as a dessert, so don't drink one if your order is as indulgent as ours was.

The entire fast-food experience was better than anticipated, not just for the clean and flavorful food, but also the character and eagerness of both the server and chef. They are truly proud of their mission to present authentic Indian food, unfettered by MSG or artificial ingredients.

When we were the only early diners, we received special attention, as well as the life story of our delightful teenage server, but I noted that as the evening progressed and the line grew longer, all of their patrons were received with the same enthusiasm.

The chef and manager, Bhupender Singh, has worked for the Sheraton hotel chain, Carnival cruises and the well known Amber India in San Francisco.

Unexpectedly terrific, Masala Bowl offers full, healthy meals without exploding the budget. I'm already planning my next visit.

Jode' Hyman is a Signal Hill freelance writer.

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