

THIS HOLE-IN-THE-WALL LIFE

PRINT E-MAIL

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Masala Miracles

BY GUSTAVO ARELLANO

Thursday, January 4, 2007 - 3:00 pm



Surprise! Photo by Tenaya Hills

"Ew!" gasped my friend. "I would never eat at a place with the word 'bowl' in it!"

We were discussing MASALA BOWL, a newish restaurant on Tustin's India Row. Their specialty is—yep—masala bowls: black plastic containers filled to the brim with your choice of the creamy Indian meal. Masalas are complex creations involving multiple spices, hours of preparation and many cultural intersections, yet the owners of Masala Bowl claim they can replicate seven types of masala in a fast-food environment without loss of taste or integrity.

We both doubted Masala Bowl until I visited their first Orange County location, a corner cubbyhole near the 5 freeway (there is also a Masala Bowl in Artesia). For a fast-food restaurant, Masala Bowl spared nothing to impress the streams of Indians already frequenting the location. There are spacious tables and counters for dine-in eaters. Two flat-screen televisions perpetually run Bollywood films; a computer is available for Internet access. On the menu are Indian desserts, specialty breads, even the Coca Cola-produced sodas Thums Up and Limca.

Everyone, it seemed, was scarfing the masala bowls, and I joined them. And joined them three more times in one week. The masalas themselves vary greatly in flavor. Bombay daal is little more than dressed-up lentil soup,

although this is the lentil soup of the gods: slightly spicy, sweet, with hints of onion and tomatoes. Even better is the khorma, gravy sprinkled with smushed cashews, the sweetest stew of your life. Masochists and Mexicans can enjoy the Andhra masala, a curry created by stuffing seemingly every pepper on the planet then adding flavor to it. The most intriguing masala is the trademarked DesiWok Manchurian, a combination of soy sauce, chile, ginger and garlic that owes its existence to Chinese laborers who migrated to Calcutta about two centuries ago. It's quite potent, so order a side of rice and throw those clumps in to mitigate the taste.

People not in the mood for masalas can order other meals. You can try the biryanis, mounds of basmati rice mixed with lamb or chicken, or enjoy the ever-dependable tandoori meats available at almost every Indian restaurant in Southern California. You should also devote at least one lunch to their wraps, stuffed with meat shavings and wrapped in soft naan. And order your sides from the best 99 cent menu in the county. A buck can get you a bucket of raita, the refreshing Indian-style yogurt, or eight vegetarian rolls, or even mini-samosas. My friend is right: approach any bowl-ish restaurants with skepticism. But do approach them: the gut you surprise may be yours.

MASALA BOWL, 14311 NEWPORT AVE., TUSTIN, (714) 505-BOWL; WWW.MASALABOWL.COM.[Contact us about this article.](#)

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