

DINING OUT

Taste of the East With Flavorful Indian Food

By M. H. REED

Published: July 3, 2005

VALHALLA

MUGHAL PALACE, open a year, brings increasingly popular Indian cuisine to the upper regions of the county. It is a welcome addition to the too few places that have already established themselves north of White Plains.

As with other Indian restaurants, Mughal Palace offers a menu of dishes from both the north and the south, and most will include a combination of the variety of tastes employed in Indian cooking: sweet, bitter, sour, salty, astringent and hot. In general, expect more sweetness and thick nuttiness from the north and hot astringency from the south.

Having recently returned from spending a month in India, I looked forward to comparing dishes. In India, intensely hot weather seems better tolerated when foods were laced with slightly sour tamarind, hot chilies and salt. All of these, when used in careful balance and countered by cooling parsley, aromatic coriander and the satisfying crispness of cucumber, are supposed to stimulate a flagging appetite.

The heat is more forgiving here, and restaurants tend to modify spicy heat appropriately. Cooler weather makes thicker, creamier, sweeter dishes more appealing. But air-conditioning gives diners a choice.

Our four visits to Mughal Palace began in February, when it was at the top of its game, and spanned the next four months. A meal here can be impressive, a well-paced feast of smashing, distinctive dishes.

But on other evenings, diners endured long waits between courses and for the check, even when the room was considerably less than half full. As for the food, some dishes depended on chili heat for flavor, and lacked the promised coconut, ginger or curry leaves that add a complexity of flavors, which should layer every dish.

That being said, sharing keema dosa would make a delicious way to begin a meal. Cut like a pizza, pie-shaped keema dosa came stuffed with savory ground lamb. Or start with shrimp bagari with overtones of mild curry and tomato.

Caveat: the portions are generous and the food is rich. Sharing fewer than the conventional number of dishes would be a good idea.

Less appealing, masala dosa, a crisped wafer-thin crepe rolled into a cylinder, had a tasty but meager potato filling that left the crepe largely hollow. Three minced fish cutlets were bland. Kebabs of minced lamb (seek kebab) skewered and roasted in a tandoor were tough and chokingly dry, a poor effort for this dish, which can be tender and succulent.

Although sag paneer (Indian cheese and creamy spinach) - a benchmark dish and one of our favorites - was up to the mark, the subtle flavoring of spinach with potatoes and cauliflower (subji sag malai) even surpassed that mark.

Judging from three tender lamb entrees, we would not hesitate trying others. Lamb Mangolorian brought the meat in a splendid gravy of coconut, curry leaves and lots of fresh ginger. Lamb rogan josh, a fragrant dish bearing hints of cardamom and cumin, came in an onion-thickened sauce. Lamb do pizza (both sautéed and puréed onions sweeten and thicken this dish) could have used more onions.

Of the seafood dishes, none was better than Mangolorian prawn: huge, juicy Black Tiger shrimp in coconut based gravy. But the shrimp were overcooked in prawn vindaloo, the hottest of Indian sauces. And mushy fish curry had little merit.

Two chicken dishes were disappointing: Murgh tikka sagwala, tandoori-cooked chicken mingled with vegetables, amounted to nothing special, and murgh rashmi kebab, like the seek kebab, was dense, tough and dry. A sauce of cold yogurt (raita) with chopped cucumber cooled off a few overly spiced dishes; in any case, it added another taste to a dish. And don't forget nan, an Indian bread that is excellent here.

Although many diners like beer with Indian food, wine is slowly gaining acceptance. Mughal Palace has an appropriate wine list as well as a full bar.

GOOD

Atmosphere A few Indian tapestries and pictures state the theme for this comfortable bright corner restaurant across from the train station. Well-stocked bar. Uneven service.

Recommended dishes Keema dosa, shrimp bagari, subji sag malai (spinach with potatoes and cauliflower), lamb rogan josh, sag paneer, Mangolorian prawn, nan.

Prices Buffet lunch, \$10; on Sunday, \$13; free for children under 4. Dinner, main dishes, \$11 to \$21.