

EATING IN / EATING OUT

Dining With *Maureen Fitzgerald*

Modern Indian cuisine, and decor

Coriander Indian Bistro in Voorhees doesn't look like a typical dimly lit Indian restaurant, with dark colors, Aladdin lamps and traditional Indian music.

Instead, the decor is bright, modern and inviting, with strains of Indian pop singer Lucky Ali in the air. The walls, painted hues of banana, mango and pumpkin, are graced with handcrafted tapestries embroidered with tiny mirrors and beads, each with a unique design representing a region of India.

The decor is a reflection of owner-chef Vipul Bhasin's mission: to bring a slice of contemporary India to America.

Although Indian cuisine has evolved dramatically over the last few decades, many Indian restaurants here are stuck in the '60s and '70s with traditional dishes from North India, he said.

Bhasin resoundingly succeeds with his fresher, lighter cooking from various regions of India, still honoring classic traditions, baking in the clay tandoor oven and cooking in the kadai, a cast-iron pot.

"My menu is made up of food that is popular in India today," Bhasin said. "Curries are less of a craze. Kabobs made in the tandoori are a much bigger hit."

More than half his menu is baked in the tandoori, including dishes you don't see too often, such as tandoori raan, a roasted leg of lamb.

A native of India, Bhasin attended cooking school there before working for the premier Taj Group of Hotels as a chef.

Until opening his 60-seat restaurant in the Ritz Center three months ago, Bhasin cooked at Indian restaurants in New York and North Jersey for 12 years, occasionally traveling to Voorhees to visit friends.

When looking to open a place of his own, Voorhees seemed the perfect fit, with a cosmopolitan feel and a dearth of Indian restaurants.

"There is a good-sized Indian population here," he said. "But my cooking appeals to a lot more. At this point, my customers are 70 percent non-Indian."

The friendly, accommodating service, well-prepared food and reasonable prices are three rea-



The Coriander Indian Bistro in Voorhees serves up traditional Indian cuisine with a modern twist, such as this tandoori raan, a roasted leg of lamb.

WILLIAM F. STEINMETZ / Inquirer Staff Photographer

Coriander Indian Bistro

910 Haddonfield-Berlin Rd., Ritz Center, Voorhees; 856-566-4546.

Hours: 11:30 a.m. to 2:30 p.m. daily; 5:30 to 10 p.m. Monday to Thursday, to 10:30 p.m. Friday, Saturday, and to 9:30 p.m. Sunday.

Prices: Appetizers \$4 to \$7; lunch \$8 buffet; entrees \$8 to \$16.

Children's menu: No, but dishes can be adapted.

Reservations: Encouraged on weekends

Credit cards: All

Smoking: No

Bar: BYOB

Parking: Yes

Access: Handicapped Accessible

sons why.

Especially for those unfamiliar with the cuisine, the wait staff is unfailingly patient and careful in explaining dishes and making recommendations. You

can even order food on a spiciness scale of one to five.

The meal began nicely with a plate of chips, made from dried, ground lentils and served with a choice of two lively chutneys: a sweet and spicy, ginger-tamarind blend, and a yogurt-mint-coriander combo. The same chutneys were used to accent food throughout the meal.

We loved the light and spicy, peri-peri appetizer, a Goan specialty Bhasin prepared with tilapia filets, a perfect canvas for the zesty coating of red chiles, ginger, garlic and wine vinegar.

Another popular starter, the vegetable samosas, were memorable: crispy, fried turnovers, stuffed with spicy potatoes and peas, the filling resonating with the color and flavor of turmeric and roasted coriander seeds.

As for the entrees, the tandoori chicken was impressive for its flavor, its electric-orange color, and its size: an entire chicken, two breasts and two legs for \$12.95.

Marinated in the chef's own masala blend of 14 freshly ground spices and yogurt, the chicken was then skewered and quick-roasted in the tandoori, leaving the skin crispy and the meat tender and juicy.

We also enjoyed the puffy,

homemade garlic naan bread; the Goan shrimp curry, reminiscent of a Thai coconut curry; and the chicken Malai kebab — chunks of breast marinated in milk and cheddar cheese with green chiles, mace and cardamom, then roasted in the clay oven and finished with a squeeze of lemon juice.

But my favorite was the leg of lamb, slow-cooked in the style of the North West frontier; it had the tenderness and texture of a favorite pot roast, with a slight vinegary tang and chile-garlic zip.

Soaked first in a marinade of malt vinegar, chile, ginger, garlic, bay leaves and cloves, then in yogurt, it was slow-cooked for a few hours in the tandoori and finished with fresh chopped cilantro.

For dessert, don't miss the creamy, runny rice pudding, made with pistachios and a hint of saffron, and the kulfi, the not-too-sweet Indian ice cream, made from reduced milk mixed with cardamom and pistachio nuts, topped with fresh berries and a cassis sauce. We were all fighting for the last bite.

Contact suburban staff writer Maureen Fitzgerald at 856-779-3223 or mfitzgerald@phillynews.com.