



Staten Island Advance

Fragrant flavors of India are served at Chirag restaurant

Recipes served were developed by owner/chef Pardeep Kumar, who is from the Punjab area

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STATEN ISLAND, N.Y. -- The flavors and hospitality of India are served with fragrant abundance at Chirag restaurant.

The eatery, which opened in February 2007, makes food typical of Northern India from recipes developed by owner/chef Pardeep Kumar, who is originally from the Punjab area. He has decorated the room with photos and memorabilia from India. In addition, that country's classical music compact discs play in the background.

Kumar, who has been in the food-service industry for a quarter century, has been a chef at such restaurants as Tabla in Manhattan and worked as well for a food-service company providing meals for airlines.

The restaurant offers an assortment of Indo-Chinese, Spanish and American fusion dishes as weekend specials.

FIRST TASTING

The day of our visit, Tom Pellegrino was sampling Indian food for the first time with fellow Eden II employee Amos Elroy.

Pellegrino, who favors Italian specialties, was intrigued by Papadam -- spicy, wafer-thin Indian crackers usually served at the start of the meal with Indian-style condiments, including onion relish, mint chutney and sweet Tamarind chutney at the start of the meal.

The cracker, said Pellegrino, was like nothing he ever tasted before, light and crunchy and similar in texture to a potato chip, but with a flavor resembling matzoh.

Elroy said that Chirag is one of his favorite Indian restaurants.

"It's a very nice atmosphere, very cozy," he said, adding, "The food is the thing that I like best, it's outstanding."

Unlike a good deal of Indian cuisine, items served at Chirag generally are mild in flavor.

"I don't use too many spices," Kumar said. "I give the customer the natural and real flavor of the food. When they eat my food they never get heartburn."

Kumar also uses healthful vegetable, olive and mustard oils in moderation.

VEGETARIAN CHOICES

At least 11 items are listed as vegetarian on the menu although some do contain dairy products. The restaurant uses only fresh vegetables. Among the Chirag specialties are Channa Masala -- a blend of chickpeas, onion, tomato and spices. Vegetable Korma combines fresh vegetables, including carrots,

cauliflower, spinach and broccoli -- seasoned with onions, tomatoes, almonds, cashews and raisins.

A tasting menu for couples includes either a vegetarian or non-vegetarian option. The vegetarian selections include a choice of soup, appetizer, three entrees, rice or nan bread, tea or coffee and dessert. The non-vegetarian focus on soup, vegetarian appetizer, an entree that combines vegetables or vegetable, meat or seafood, as well as rice or bread, tea or coffee and dessert.

Halal lamb, beef, goat and chicken are available.

Quick-cooking nan bread, an Indian staple, is cooked in a classic Tandoor oven when needed to fill customers' orders. Other breads on the menu include Chirag's special white bread stuffed with chicken, onions, pepper and potato. Meanwhile, Peshawari Nani -- a white-flour bread stuffed with almonds, cashews, raisins and cherries also is available.

MADE TO ORDER

"We don't re-heat any chicken or meat," said Kumar said. "The chicken and all meats are cooked when ordered and are very moist, juicy and tender."

Kumar said that 99.9 percent of Americans love the Chicken Tikka prepared with boneless poultry parts marinated in yogurt and ground herbs and baked in the tandoori. Another favorite is Malai Tikka -- boneless, cubed chicken marinated in a mix of garlic, ginger, cream cheese, herbs and an assortment of Indian spices.

A wide selection of lamb dishes also are served. A big seller is Boti Kebab, featuring cubed lamb seasoned with garlic, ginger and yogurt and then cooked in the tandoor. Seekh Kebab combines ground lamb with onions and peppers seasoned with ginger, herbs and spices and then threaded on skewers. Lamb Vindaloo -- cubed lamb cooked with potatoes in a curry Vindaloo sauce -- noted Kumar, "Vindaloo is a spicy sauce, but your lips never burn. All spice flavors come together in your mouth."

A Tandoori Mixed Grill of crowd pleasers includes Tandoori Chicken, Chicken Tikka, Boti Kebab, Malai Tikka and Seekh Kebab.

Favorite desserts include Gulab Jamun, homemade soft milk cheese balls dipped in honey syrup and served warm as well as Indian Rice Pudding, a blend of milk, saffron and nuts.

Among the cool refreshers served to patrons are freshly squeezed orange and mango juice and Lassis shakes, a mix of fresh fruit, yogurt and buttermilk.

Indian spice tea similar to chai is seasoned with cardamom, cloves, cinnamon and fennel seeds. Indian wine, beer and a wide selection of alcoholic beverages also are available.

Hours are: Monday through Friday from 11:30 a.m. to 3 p.m. and 5 p.m. to 10 p.m.; Saturday from 1 p.m. to 10:30 p.m., and Sunday from noon to 10 p.m.

Chirag, which also accommodates patrons with takeout and delivery orders, is located at 1198B Forest Ave. Call 718-273-8777, or visit the Web site at www.chiragnyc.org.

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