



GLOBE STAFF PHOTO/JUSTINE ELLEMENT

Shikha Kapoor, designer of dishes at Masala Art, displays some of her specialty items.

DINING OUT ALISON ARNETT

A SWANK SPOT FOR INDIAN IN NEEDHAM

A sign on the door of Masala Art boasts a "fashionable" bar. On one recent Friday evening the hostess, a sweet blond teen, sports a blue bindi mark on her forehead and looks as though she might be dressed for a costume party. Loud rock music plays relentlessly. This four-month-old restaurant with a long, long menu and hours that stretch from morning into late night seems to be trying hard to be hip.

It's both endearing and a little comical. Or at least it could be, if all those details were not swept away by the food -- which is very, very good.

Indian food has finally arrived in the United States, and Masala Art, in the heart of the Western suburbs, is poised to take advantage of its widening popularity. Owned by Vinod and Shikha Kapoor, who also are proprietors of Bombay Club in Harvard Square and several other Indian restaurants, Masala Art obviously looks to the success of Mantra, the chic Indian fusion restaurant downtown.

The chef, Sunil Soni, chats with customers at the Spice Bar as fragrances of spices waft across the room; the bustling kitchen, with nine cooks, is partly visible from the dining room; the bar is a central part of the restaurant; the wine list is long and varied; and the dining room is beautifully decorated in jew-



990 Great Plain Ave.
Needham. 781-449-4050.
All major credit cards accepted.

Wheelchair accessible.
PRICES Appetizers \$4-\$12;
main dishes \$12-\$21;
desserts \$6-\$8

HOURS Lunch, buffet or menu, daily 11 a.m.-3 p.m.;
dinner, daily 3-10 p.m.
Reservations accepted.

- ★ ★ ★ ★ Extraordinary
- ★ ★ ★ Excellent
- ★ ★ Very Good
- ★ Good
- Fair

Ratings reflect the restaurant critic's judgment of the food, service and atmosphere in relation to the price, based on several anonymous visits.

ellike colors.

However, the service is inconsistent and could use some tuning up: One evening the wait staff handles our large party helpfully and efficiently; another time the waitress's inexperience gets exasperating by the end of the evening.

The ambience may be a blend of East and West, but there's no fusion in the cooking. Masala Art is a blockbuster show, featuring dishes from

many regions of a fascinatingly diverse cuisine.

We start with dahi poori, lentil puffs that truly deserve the name, wisps to dip into yogurt or tangy tamarind chutney. Many of the snacks that serve as appetizers in Indian restaurants are fried and bland, but here the vegetable pakoras sport a crisp outside crust and just enough spice inside to be intriguing. Samosas are pretty, peaked triangular turnovers, and though the filling of potatoes and peas is heavy, the crust crackles satisfyingly under the teeth, and the thin coriander chutney makes a great dipping sauce.

South Indian dosas and dumplings have become popular recently; they're listed in a separate section of the menu, but they make a great first course for a group. The Masala Art chefs go in for dramatic presentation in the dosas. The paper-thin rice and lentil crepes are teased into a high cone and flanked by little bowls of coconut chutney, lentil broth with potatoes and carrots, and a fiery tomato chutney. On one visit, the dosa is a little too dry, but the next time it's perfect, a wonderful foil for the delicious chutneys.

Although the dishes list various regions, they still seem to fall into the vinegary sauces and the creamy variety, some with a coconut base, some without. Saffron chicken melds the distinctive flavors of coconut milk

with saffron -- it's a winning combination. Sali boti, tender lamb chunks flavored with ginger and other spices, is pungent and slightly oily at the edges, and the finely diced apricots and slivers of potato crisps on top mark the dish as from the Parsee minority population with Iranian roots in India.

Salmon moilee falls into the creamy coconut sauce category, gently touched with tomatoes and onions, and appealingly luxurious. A lobster curry, with plenty of big chunks of the shellfish, hits a tangy note, again without much heat. Only a fish curry seems too bland.

Masala Art has a full list of tandoor dishes, plus two cooks in the kitchen concentrating on them. Seekh kebab avadh, described on the menu as a speciality of the Muslim city of Lucknow, is an interesting dish of minced lamb kebabs, slightly smoky on the outside from the tandoori oven and moist inside. Compared to some of the other rich sauces, this seems like virtuous diet fare with onion and tomato slices along with the meat.

The most memorable taste, not surprisingly, is the vindaloo -- a chicken version so tangy and so resoundingly spicy that eyes water. There's nothing as disappointing as an under-spiced vindaloo, and this one is right on the mark.

Breads, too, are well made. A bread basket full of buttered and garlic naan proves difficult to resist, and another variety, pudeena paratha, with delicate, flaky layers adds to the interest with flakes of mint on top.

With all the intriguing dishes on the menu, it almost seems unfair to complain about desserts. But fanciness overrode good sense on some of these. A soupy mango pudding has pleasing flavor and a fitting simplicity. But kufli, the Indian ice milk infused with cardamom, comes decorated with fruit puree and hard pasta strands dyed bright orange-rose with rose water. Laid out on a plate, the dessert looks like a Native American sand painting. Rice pudding, also a very soupy version, is decorated with squiggles of pomegranate syrup, which doesn't enhance the flavor.

That's a minor quibble about Masala Art, though, since there's plenty else to finish with, say lassi, a yogurt drink in many flavors, or sweetened chai tea. Or one could also just go back to eating more Indian breads, or scooping coconut chutney right out of the little condiment bowls with a spoon.

Masala Art has that effect -- it's a little self-conscious in spots and the service details show rough edges. But the cuisine and the enthusiasm of those presenting this broad swatch of Indian food is contagious.

Alison Arnett is the Globe's restaurant critic.