

The art of blending spices

A delicious education

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THE TWO-WEEK-OLD Spice Bar at Masala Art, in Needham, is the single-best reason to drive out to the suburbs since God invented driveways. The food is so good, the experience so theatrical, the décor so jewel-box, that you'll be checking airfares to New Delhi well before dessert. Knee-ing up to the Spice Bar for the fixed-price, gazillion-course feast is somewhere between great-food-as-theater and a one-on-one cooking class given by a master Indian chef. It's simply one of the most delicious and stimulating dining experiences available in the Greater Boston area. If you already know that you like Indian food, you'll be thrilled. If you think you don't, have dinner at the Spice Bar before you make up your mind. In the hands of executive chef Sunil Soni, Indian food is an art form, a subtle, gorgeous blending of dozens of spices in dishes that take days to prepare but only minutes to cook.

Masala Art is the Kapoor family's fifth restaurant, and it is certainly their most ambitious. While the other restaurants in the family empire are very good - two Bombay Clubs (one in Harvard Square, the other in Faneuil Hall), the new Curry Leaf in Natick, and Kebab-N-Curry in Boston - Masala Art reaches for a different plane. And it is obvious as soon as you walk through the door. Like some of the chic, contemporary Indian restaurants in New York and London, Masala Art draws its color palette from the vibrant hues of Indian silks. Hot-pink dupioni silk pillows rest on the sofa. There are neon blue lights glowing at the bar, lime-green banquettes, ochre linens, hip, stainless-steel dishes shaped like lotus leaves on the tables, and slick fiber-optic lights in wall niches that echo the candle-lit walls of most traditional Indian homes. Ganesha, the Hindu god that looks like a happy elephant seated in a lotus position, adorns the bar top's carved-stone frieze. But the best is the Spice Bar. It is a totally new concept for contemporary Indian dining in Boston.

Nine tall stools surround a tiled, blue-green iridescent counter. Diners face the chef, who uses two wagon-wheel-size steel griddles and two gas burners to turn out a multi-course Indian banquet, narrating his movements as he goes. "First the potato chips - aloo tikki - fried just to crisp in vegetable oil," Soni says, as he juggles five dishes simul-

aneously. "Now some saffron in the chicken, and a little more fresh ginger, I think. Watch! I am waiting a moment for the sauce to reduce, and then I add more yogurt to the fresh mint sauce, and now a bit of lemon juice goes into the mushroom and peas. Do you like it? Do you want it hotter?" The Spice Bar's menu is different from the menu in the main dining room: with less sauce, fewer stews, and more à la minute cooking, it's generally more appropriate for real-time cooking in front of diners who want to demystify the cuisine. Patrons choose from one of three menus - vegetarian (\$30 per person), non-vegetarian (\$36), or seafood (\$40) - and the chef takes it from there. Although each menu features about 10 dishes - not including basmati rice and bread (you could make a meal out of the puffed garlic naan with fresh basil, the chickpea flatbread *missi roti*, or the *chapatis*) - it all tastes so good that it is impossible to pace yourself. In a moment of insanity, I briefly consider asking for seconds of the ground-chicken and ground-lamb kebabs served with the fresh mint sauce. What am I thinking? By the time the "main course" arrives - a lamb dish, another chicken, and another vegetable dish, this one a piquant plate of green and yellow peppers sautéed with onions, fresh pineapple, and blueberries in a cardamom-and-tamarind sauce, plus yet another small plate containing a tomato-y dish of black lentils cooked to smoothness overnight in the tandoor oven - we've eaten enough to get us through till Thanksgiving. And that's before dessert.

So far, the prix fixe demonstration dinner at the Spice Bar is available only Monday through Thursday for two seatings at 6:30 and 8 p.m.; parties must comprise a minimum of two people to a maximum of nine. Because the meal requires significant advance-prep time, reservations are required. (But the restaurant might take a walk-in if you call to say you're en route.) So far, there are no plans to open up the Spice Bar for dinner on weekend nights. Owner Vinood Kapoor explains that the restaurant gets "too noisy on weekends for the diners sitting at the Spice Bar to hear the chef. And learning while they eat is an important part of the experience." The good news is that even the patrons seated in the dining room profit from the show; all they have to do is crane their necks around a little to pick up a bit of

technique.

Masala Art is managed by Sorabh Kapoor, the son of Vinood and Shakila Kapoor. (Vinood is the company operator and Shakila is the executive chef. Since the 1980s, her recipes have kept quality high and consistent at all the family restaurants.) The 25-year-old Sorabh, an alumnus of Lexington High and BU's hospitality school, is soon to be married in a five-day celebration that might or might not begin with him astride a white horse at the head of a parade from the Hindu temple through the streets of Andover. (He'll decide about the horse based on the weather forecast closer to the day. It can be nippy in late November and not well suited for traditional Indian formal wedding attire.) Sorabh tells me that it took almost a year and a half to build the splendid new restaurant. The construction values are evident everywhere. Each surface is new, glossy, and first class. The bar is delightful, with a full license and a deep wine list. This is clearly one of the rare Indian restaurants that takes wine seriously; there is a beverage manager, Jason, who came from UpStairs at the Pudding and Locke-Ober, and there are over 20 wines by the glass. Chef Sunil Soni was recruited from India six months ago to open Masala Art. Talkative and highly proficient, he spent years cooking at the international hotel level, taking his degree in India, but opening restaurants in Dubai, Kuwait, and Kenya - even the first hotel in Turkmenistan - and he is clearly a master teacher. I've always yearned to know how to handle Indian spices, and an evening of watching Soni is more than equivalent to a full-on series of classes at the Center for Adult Education. And you get to eat, too.

In addition to the Spice Bar, the dining room at Masala Art serves the full spectrum of Indian cuisine. Every kind of tikka, tandoor, samosa, and gosht that your heart could require or desire. The restaurant also serves lunch every day, with an appetizer buffet and a \$10 lunch buffet. It's not an inexpensive restaurant, and is certainly at the high end for Indian cuisine in Boston, but the food is abnormally fresh, crafted, and delectable. In the hands of a masterful chef at Masala Art, the food is art indeed. Never too spicy, but always supremely well spiced. It's well worth the drive.

Masala Art, 990 Great Plain Avenue, Needham. Call (781) 449-4050.