

MAY 24, 2016

Indian Accent Has a Cosmopolitan Twang



The emails from New Delhi began last spring.

A new one arrived every few months, informing me that a branch of a restaurant in that city named Indian Accent was about to open in Midtown, and urging me to check it out.

“Dear and Most Revered Mr. Pete,” one began. “Just wanted to let you know about the greatest Indian restaurant in the World.”

Another praised the original location’s kulchas, or stuffed flatbreads, particularly one filled with duck and hoisin. “It’s as Indian as Padma Lakshmi,” my correspondent wrote. “But definitely more delicious.”

These notes were my first exposure to the cult inspired by Manish Mehrotra. Since opening Indian Accent in a small hotel on the outskirts of New Delhi in 2009, he has become one of the most admired chefs in India. Mr. Mehrotra’s style is lightened by modern influences from abroad (he has trained in other Asian countries and worked in London) but anchored by the culture he grew up in; at his New Delhi restaurant, a scoop of kulfi may be served in a toy

The New York Times

MAY 24, 2016

pressure cooker, an appliance roughly as common in Indian homes as microwaves are in American ones.

In India, Mr. Mehrotra's cooking feeds a desire to see traditional food bent, twisted and played with until it tastes new again. New York could use more of that, too. Junoon and Tamarind Tribeca are on the short list of comfortable, modern Indian restaurants where you can get dressed up for food that looks pretty on the plate. But surprises, ladled out by an active imagination working in an Indian mode, have been scarce since Tabla closed in 2010.

Indian Accent, which finally opened in February at the foot of Le Parker Meridien Hotel, has surprises. It also has all the comforts of a restaurant where the prix fixe menu offers three courses at \$75 (or \$90 for four). Except for one gold wall at the far end of the restaurant, the interior stays away from anything that may play into preconceptions of how Indian restaurants are supposed to look.

At the sharp-edged marble bar, cocktails are infused with tea and spices and made with a care that overcomes goofy names like Transcendental Medication. Tables are set with stiffly pressed napkins and thin-stemmed wineglasses — a cue to pay attention to Daniel Beedle's list, which is well stocked with aromatic whites and savory reds that know how to get along with layered spices.

Mr. Mehrotra shares the title of chef with Vivek Rana, who will eventually take charge of the kitchen. Duck kulcha isn't on their menu, but the kulcha stuffed with pastrami and mustard helped me see why my New Delhi informants had been so excited.

"The chef got the idea for this dish from Peking duck," our server said as he set down a long wooden tray with a copper pan of shredded lamb at one end, a stack of thin griddled flatbreads called rumali roti in the other, with cucumber spears and four kinds of chutney in the middle. One of those was hoisin sauce subcontinentalized with tamarind, which did bring Peking within shouting distance. But as I folded a roti around some soft spiced lamb and spooned on one chutney or all four — they were great separately and great together — I kept thinking about tacos.

Letting China, Mexico and the Carnegie Deli barge into an Indian restaurant without having the dinner turn into a chaotic grab bag is an impressive feat. And fried squid sprinkled with puffed rice and chickpea-flour threads to turn up the crunch factor? Well, why not, especially when the squid is dusted with a spice blend that could make a tongue depressor taste good.

I don't know how to categorize the "sweet pickle ribs." They are not, in fact, pickled, but, in their tart mango sauce with strips of dried mango on top, these tender baby backs are so good I'd eat them under any name.

The soy keema is a marvelous thing, too. This version is less like the original keema, a stew of ground lamb and peas, than it is like an energetically spiced filling for a vegetarian sloppy Joe.

The New York Times

MAY 24, 2016

I'm seeing a takeout window with lines outside on 57th Street. It's possible I got the whole idea from the delicious tiny rolls, perfumed with lime leaves, that accompany the keema on a skewer, looking like marshmallows ready for a campfire.

Mixed in with the outstanding dishes are some that won't inspire many international emails. Kolhapuri chicken, a chile-fueled curry from western India, appears as an appetizer of cold chicken salad that you could feed to the least adventurous eater you know. Fried shiso leaves looked impressive standing upright in a pile of potatoes and water chestnuts drizzled with chutney, but the batter was too thick for the herb to have much impact.

Indian Accent is a young restaurant, still learning to transplant an approach that worked in New Delhi to Manhattan. It can take time for chefs to sort out their suppliers in a new region. Fillets of sea bass glazed with tamarind had a muddy, bottom-feeder taste that we don't usually seek in wild saltwater fish.

The menu is less confusing than it was at first, although the crossbreeding of a prix fixe setup with à la carte supplements can still be awkward. The lamb, for instance, costs an extra \$38. The price is fair enough for a platter that is bigger than many main courses around town, but I wish it didn't have to be stapled to the already considerable cost of a meal.

The complexity of deciding what or how to order is one reason servers are prone to waitsplaining. Dinner requires a lot of patient listening and smiling in these early months. True, the menu is paved with terms some New Yorkers will trip over. I was happy to learn that the sweet potato shakarkandi are tender cubes stacked over shaved kohlrabi in one of the best small starters.

But I'm always impatient to start eating, especially if what's on the way is a dessert as wonderful as the makhan malai. Traditionally a street snack, here it is a fluffy mound of aerated saffron milk sprinkled with rose petals, almonds and palm sugar.

The fun of the dessert is in the way these crystallized toppings transform the unsweetened saffron milk once everything meets inside your mouth. It's the kind of happy collision that few restaurants in town can deliver as well as Indian Accent.