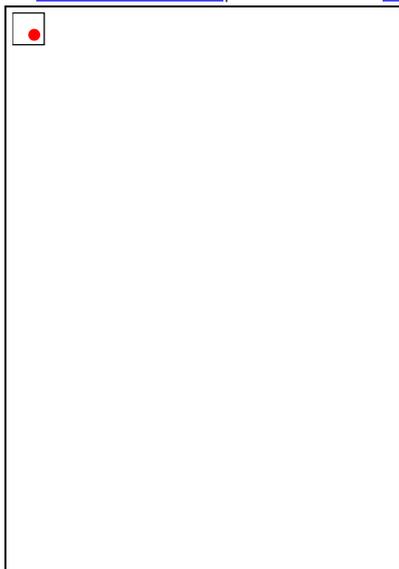
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Flavors of India

The Nizam's opens in former Drazil location

By Frank Gabriel

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Owner/chef Syed Abbas
(photos by nick valinote)

Newly opened on the Black Horse Pike in Egg Harbor Township, The Nizam's restaurant offers earnest Indian cuisine in a casual, colorful setting. The location -- formerly the excellent Drazil restaurant -- despite a somewhat checkered history seems to have at last found its ideal, long-term inhabitant.

Dressed in bright, cheery tones, the space is divided into two distinct areas. To the right, a long counter, facing a line of cozy booths, which peer out on the busy roadway. To the left side, a main seating area, decorated in eye-pleasing hues of golden and auburn.

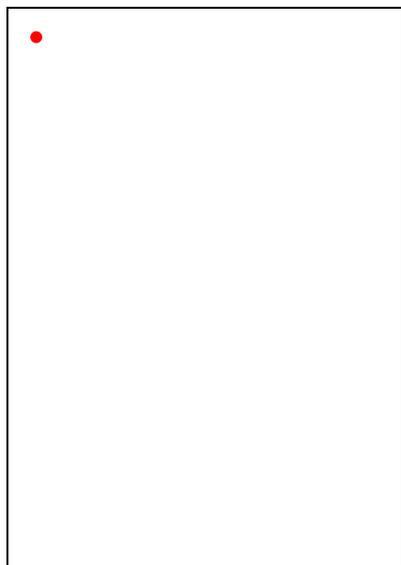
The menu is lengthy and diverse, with more than six dozen selections, covering both the standard and more obscure cuisines native to the Indian subcontinent.

This serves to counter a great misconception; the western notion that all Indian food is homogenous and similar.

Yes, those with heartier appetites who appreciate the joys of capsicum in all its incarnations will be well served, especially with spicy vindaloo-style items. But so will vegetarians, and in fact the largest section of that bill of fare is devoted to dishes entirely devoid of meat.

During our visit, we began by sampling Mulligatawny (\$3.25) a traditional soup composed of pureed lentils and vegetables, creating a rich, vibrant broth. Yellow-orange in color, the Mulligatawny -- what a fun word, try saying it a few times -- actually matched The Nizam's interior color scheme, serving as a cool sort of microcosm of the restaurant as a whole. Steamy and aromatic, its combination of heat and savory spicing braced us against the blasting, frigid December air outside.

Fried food is particularly popular in southern India, and the appetizer of vegetable pakora (\$5.95) served to illustrate why. Delicate, crusty little bundles of potato, cauliflower and spinach, plus sliced onion in discs, were battered with a thick, herbal blend. Crunchy and hot, they were plated with a duet of sauces: a fairly standard minted yogurt plus an exceptional sweet sauce, molasses-dark, but tasting more from the complex essence of honey. The spinach version was especially noteworthy, moist, tender within and probably about as healthful as deep-fried food can ever hope to be.



Another appetizer option, chili chicken (\$9.95), brought 15 or so chunks of cubed poultry. Aggressively dosed with green chiles and spices, these weren't as incendiary as vindaloo -- India's answer to Italian fra diavolo -- but certainly flavorful and eye-opening. We enjoyed them rolled up in tandoori roti (\$1.50), puffy whole wheat bread cooked in the tandoor oven (more on that coming up) creating a sort of Asian tortilla. The bread, cut into four wide arcs, was hand-formed with plenty of texture and served up incredibly fresh.

Now about that tandoor oven. For those unfamiliar, it's a deep, wide cooking vessel, traditionally made of clay. Within the confines various foods -- like that bread -- are cooked, roasted more specifically, at extremely high temps. The results are remarkable crisp exteriors, from the intense Fahrenheit levels, coupled with a flavor profile that is unique in the culinary world.

Meats and seafood, like those in our tandoori mixed grill (\$15.95) further take on an unusual, deep-red glow, not unlike the smoke ring present in quality barbecue. This combination order brought together bone-in chicken, kabobs of both lamb and chicken along with several jumbo shrimp. The beauty of the tandoor is an ability to quickly cook dense proteins, maintaining their natural aroma and producing the juiciest meat possible.

The Nizam's

Address: 6666 Black Horse Pike, Egg Harbor Township

Phone: 677-8829

Details: Major credit cards accepted. Open daily 11:30am-10:30pm. Lunch buffet \$9.95.

Observing our cardinal rule, the final piece to our puzzle was a house signature entrée, the chicken La-Jawab (\$12.95).

Easily our favorite dish on this night, the big pieces of white meat chicken were bathed in a tangy sauce of ginger, garlic, tomato and chiles. We're hard pressed to think of a more apt culinary pairing than those two "g's" -- ginger and garlic -- and the pinkish sauce, finished with a bit of cream, was rich and luxuriant.

In a region where ethnic diversity has of late become an accepted fact of life, we can only hope more restaurants like The Nizam's arrive, expanding all of our dining horizons.

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