

Indian food at The Nizam's proves a welcome treat

By TAYLOR YARBOROUGH, Press Restaurant Critic

| Posted: Saturday, April 4, 2009 |

EGG HARBOR TOWNSHIP - On the Black Horse Pike, you have to be careful not to pass the nondescript, beige-colored building that was previously home to an organic-foods restaurant called Drazil.

But, most people who grew up in the area will remember it as the 1 1/4 Landing Strip, an always-smoky, popular bar among locals.

With a large, new sign along the curb and some nice renovations inside, it has definitely found its rightful owner. When you enter, you will delight in the exotic scent that lingers, hinting at what is to come when you taste the food.

The refurbished interior is simply decorated, but with cloth-draped tables that are neatly set with cutlery, it has certainly been elevated a notch or two from its previous incarnations. Decor aside, it is the food that shines in all its aromatic glory. If you haven't yet experienced Indian food, most likely you will taste things that will titillate your palate in a brand new way.

It's difficult to decide what to eat when faced with unfamiliar fare, but the menu offers helpful descriptions. Take, for instance, our first course, mulligatawny soup (\$3.95): delicately spiced, fresh vegetable-and-lentil puree.

With consistency similar to split-pea soup, the seasoning was surprisingly mild. I've tried several types of mulligatawny over the years, with some flavored heavily with curry and coconut. This recipe was indeed more subtle than most I've had.

Most of the appetizers are fried, so if you are counting calories, I recommend that you take a day off to enjoy the traditional preparations.

The vegetable mixed pakora (\$5.95) reminded us of Japanese tempura, only this version was thickly coated with graham-flour batter and cooked longer. Individual pieces of vegetables and thin slices of paneer (Indian cottage cheese that is formed into a mass and sliced) were deep-fried until very browned. What turned them into something special were the tamarind and yogurt-mint sauces that we used for dipping.

Similarly, the minced-meat samosas (\$5.95), tasty, deep-fried doughy puffs filled with ground chicken, lamb and beef, reminded us again of another ethnic culinary staple: savory knishes.

Meals automatically come with a basket of poppadom, a customary accompaniment of peppery cracker-bread that is as thin as lace, extremely crispy and fun to nibble.

At an additional cost, there are other assorted breads offered on the menu. We enjoyed the naan platter (\$4.95) brimming with a triple dose of warm, pita-like, round flatbreads. Varieties included one plain, one topped with fresh mint and one topped with garlic and fresh coriander (generally referred to as cilantro).

For dinner, we requested our entrees to be gently spiced instead of fiery, but they still had a nice kick, just enough to stimulate our taste buds. We discovered elegant spices in the midst of it all, such as whole cardamom pods and nutmeg.

The lamb biryani (\$13.95), a mix of tender lamb and onions served with fragrant rice, was absolutely delicious, as was the fish begam bahar (\$14.95), a tilapia fillet baked with tomatoes and green peppers in thick, slightly sweet vegetable gravy studded with coriander. Lovely steamed basmati rice flecked with cumin seeds tasted marvelous.

Our palates are accustomed to American desserts, and Indian confections are rather distinct and different from what we are used to. I found the gulab jamun (\$3.95) pleasantly sweet and unique. Small, deep-fried dumplings made from dried milk and cottage cheese were soaked in sugar syrup and rose water. My tablemate's pistachio ice cream (\$3.95) didn't quite hite the mark, especially since we are used to creamier, richer ice creams. Even though it was packed with nuts, we couldn't get passed its grainy, icy quality to fully appreciate the flavor.

Granted, we were one of only three tables at the time, but the service was terrific. Our waitress couldn't have been better or nicer. She didn't overtly get annoyed by all of our questions about the dishes and their seasonings. She's probably used to it.

One of the best parts about eating this food is the wonderful aftertaste that stays with you. Like its culture, Indian cuisine is comprised of splendid, vivid colors and textures. Don't be afraid to try it. You might become addicted.

(Taylor Yarborough is the pseudonym of a southern New Jersey food writer. Write to Yarborough c/o Food Editor James Clark at jlark@pressofac.com. Restaurant-ratings guide: 4 stars, extraordinary; 3 stars, excellent; 2 stars, good; 1 star, fair; 0 stars, poor.)

The Nizam's

6666 Black Horse Pike

Egg Harbor Township

Phone: 609-677-8829

Hours: 11:30 a.m. until 10:30 p.m. daily

Liquor license: BYOB

Rating:

Credit cards: All major

Price range: Appetizers \$1.95 to \$10.95; entrees \$7.95 to \$14.95

Our bill for two: \$57 plus tip

© 1970-2009 Press of Atlantic City Media Group