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Gourmet

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CAFE SPICE

Indian food has always seemed to me a natural choice for college students: it's exotic (satisfying their curiosity), it's spicy (satisfying their sensuality), and, most important of all, it can be downright inexpensive (satisfying their budget). Unfortunately, most Indian restaurants of the latter persuasion in New York can also be downright indifferent.

Not so Cafe Spice, the recent Greenwich Village arrival that sits just a few

short blocks from New York University. Its quality comes as little surprise—it's owned by the Malhotra family, whose expensive uptown place, Dawat, is considered by many to be the city's best Indian restaurant. The Malhotras wanted to offer a more affordable version of what they do—and they have plans to launch Cafe Spice satellites in college towns throughout the United States, serving authentic, carefully cooked, unfused Indian food.

The *tandoor* oven, visible through an open window in the back, springs into action with the starters, yielding silky cubes of salmon (*saloni machi*) poised between earthy salmon and spicy Indian flavors. I'm not crazy about the rather dry *samosas*, but of the three *dosas*—those south Indian rice-flour pancakes—I like the one stuffed with chopped lamb best. Another delicious starter is *jingha masaledar*, perfectly cooked shrimp in

Red snapper and lamb chops at Cafe Spice



a gingery tomato sauce. All of the menu's shrimp dishes, in fact—in a complete reversal of the usual situation at cost-saving Indian restaurants—are prepared and presented with great care.

The restaurant has hit upon an unusual service style that helps to maximize the value: one price brings a main dish, a mound of *basmati* rice, a bowl each of chunky *dal* and of spiced vegetables, and a hunk of chewy *naan*. Among the mains, fish gets the treatment it deserves. *Tandoori machi* is the oven-roasted fish of the day, and the zesty,

crusty red snappers I've had remind me of the food at Trishna, my favorite seafood restaurant in Bombay.

Chicken dominates the meat choices, with great versions of *tandoori* chicken, chicken *tikka* (the *noorie malai tikka* features a wonderfully creamy coating on cubes of grilled chicken), and *hare masale ka murg* (a chicken-and-spinach stew flavored with fenugreek)—but don't pass up the fabulous *barrahm*, bright-red, charred, long-cooked lamb chops, wet with spice coating and wild with flavor, a kind of Indian barbecue. As for vegetable dishes, I love the *tandoori seekh* (a large, lively assortment of smoky vegetables) and the *rai allu*, a mix of potatoes, curry leaves, and mustard seeds that's very Bengali in character.

You won't find the fancy platings of expensive uptown Indian restaurants, nor the elaborate décor of the new crop of Indian-fusion establishments here. What you will find is the kind of everyday Indian restaurant with integrity that is so rare in New York. Call it Indian 101, and attend frequently.

Most starters at Cafe Spice are \$4 or \$5; shrimp dishes cost \$8. Main courses range from \$13.50 to \$18. Desserts are \$5. Cafe Spice is open Monday through Thursday from 11:30 to 10:30; Fridays from 11:30 to 11:30; Saturdays from 1 to 11:30; and Sundays from 1 to 10:30.

CAFE SPICE
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