

THE DISH

In this Chaat room, the dialects are spicy

A Surrey fast-food joint offers up finger-licking snacks with Indian-Chinese influences that occasionally can be gloriously messy.

Apna Chaat House
112-7500 120th St., Surrey;
604-502-8081; www.apnachaat.ca
Cheap Eats: Indian street food

REVIEWED BY
ALEXANDRA GILL

Suddenly, Vikram Vij makes sense. Well, let's hope the impish restaurateur (who recently relocated Vij's to Cambie Street) always retains some of his alluring mystique. But after visiting Apna Chaat House in Surrey, I can appreciate many of the dishes that he and his partner Meeru Dhalwala have made famous in a whole new light.

Take their lamb popsicles, for instance. Everyone loves the wine-marinated French chops served with fenugreek curry cream for dipping. And most people understand (theoretically, at least) that it is a gourmet version of a traditional Indian dish. But until you have actually tasted said Indian dish, well, it is somewhat like trying to wrap your head around Daniel Boulud's foie-gras-stuffed db Burger without ever having eaten a Big Mac.

The moment of culinary clarity occurred last week on an afternoon sojourn to Surrey. In a nondescript strip mall on the southern reaches of Scott Road (Note to reader: Scott Road is the more commonly known name for 120th Street), there is a small, fast-food restaurant unlike any other Indian restaurant in the Lower Mainland.

The walls are painted bright marigold yellow and plastered with labelled photographs of the signature dishes. You place your order at a till by the doorway and pay upfront before taking a seat



Deep-fried chicken lollipops are marinated in chili-ginger-garlic paste. JOHN LEHMANN/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

at wooden tables covered in laminated menus. The food comes out piping hot on metal trays, having been cooked to order in a small open kitchen festooned with flower garlands and set behind a tin drum to make it look like a roadside stand.

In Hindi, chaat is a verb that means "to snack." The literal translation is "to lick" (with your fingers). Chaat is also the noun for savoury snacks made from broken pieces of fried flatbread with various toppings such as chutney, yogurt, tamarind sauce, fried onions, chickpeas, salty spices, fresh herbs and fried noodles. It's almost like the Indian version of nachos.

Apna Chaat offers several types

of the latter nacho-style chaat. But the menu also encompasses all the different types of snack foods, or chaat, sold at roadside stalls across India.

Confused? So was I. Just order a bunch of dishes and dig in. Start with chicken lollipops. Yes, these are the inspiration for Vij's lamb popsicles and they're not just for kids. The deep-fried chicken drumettes and French-cut wings are marinated in chili-ginger-garlic paste, coated in a light cornstarch batter and served with their bone ends wrapped in aluminum foil.

The lollipops are an Indian-Chinese dish hailing from Calcutta. And there is a whole Indian-Chinese section on the Apna Chaat menu, including Szechuan noo-

dles and veggie chow mein, if you care to explore.

To be honest, I'd take Vij's delectable lamb popsicles over these rather dry chicken lollipops in a heartbeat. But it is one of those dishes that you just have to try to better understand its gourmet iteration.

Bikram Singh, who owns Apna Chaat with his brothers Jogi and Raunaq, is a professionally trained chef from Bombay. He worked for the Taj Group of Hotels in India before moving to Vancouver in 2001. The three brothers have been in the restaurant business for a while. They owned Cafe Bombay in Kitsilano and the Bollywood-themed Bombay Se in Surrey.

Apna Chaat, which they opened in 2006, became so popular with the local Indian community, they ended up closing Bombay Se in 2010. Mr. Singh says they serve 300 to 400 people every day.

"If you ask our customers, they will tell you that this is the closest you can get to street food in India," he later explains by phone. "It's a very unique style of cooking. The tastes and flavours are authentic. But it's a little more hygienic."

Do try pav bhaji, a mashed vegetable curry served with toasted, buttered dinner rolls. (Apna Chaat doesn't offer naan bread.) Or the light and crispy fish pakora battered in tangy mustard oil and chickpea flour. Baidi roti is a folded wrap filled with chopped onions, tomatoes and mint chutney. Similar to French toast, it's dipped in egg and griddled to order.

You can't really go wrong. The flavours are all bold and punchy. But whatever you order, don't leave without trying golgappa (available in six or 24 pieces). It's basically cold tamarind soup served in bite-sized edible bowls called puri. You crack the top of the crispy, hollow semolina puff pastry, spoon in some potatoes and chickpeas, fill it with tamarind water and swallow in a single bite. (In India, it would be served ready-made and eaten on the go, not as a sit-down dish.)

At My Shanti, Mr. Vij's restaurant in Surrey, the puri puffs are served over shot glasses of Peruvian ceviche. You are supposed to pour the soupy ceviche into the pastry and eat in a single bite. I always thought Mr. Vij's dish was kind of weird (and messy), albeit tasty. Now it makes total sense.

Special to The Globe and Mail

Q&A JOHNNIE CHRISTMAS

It's a bird, it's a cat – it's Angel Catbird

IAN BAILEY VANCOUVER

Vancouver-based comic-book artist Johnnie Christmas is 15 pages into drawing his latest project – a three-volume comic-book series called *Angel Catbird* that is being written by Margaret Atwood.

Yes, that Margaret Atwood, the acclaimed Canadian novelist and author of such works as *The Handmaid's Tale*, *The Edible Woman* and *Alias Grace*. Here, Ms. Atwood, who has previously dabbled in the art form, is chronicling the adventures of a superhero who is part cat and part bird for publication this fall from U.S. publisher Dark Horse Comics. The project is being published in association with the Keep Cats Safe and Save Bird Lives initiative of the conservation charity Nature Canada. By the time Mr. Christmas is done, he will have pencilled and inked about 220 pages of material over three volumes.

Mr. Christmas, 39, is a citizen in good standing of Vancouver's community of comic-book artists. Working out of his studio in the city's hip Mount Pleasant neighbourhood, he has been pencilling and inking the imagery for the project, guided by Ms. Atwood's scripts and the dialogue with her and the project's editor.

Puerto Rico-born Mr. Christmas was raised in Miami and settled in Vancouver in 2009. As an artist, he has steered clear of the superheroes of U.S. publishers Marvel and DC. Mr. Christmas, who lists the work of Jaime Hernandez, of *Love and Rockets*, and Katsuhiro Otomo's Japanese manga series *Akira* as influences, has made his mark with various projects including the Image Comics series *Sheltered*, the film rights to which were sold to the producers of TV's



Johnnie Christmas is drawing and inking a Margaret Atwood-written comic book series called *Angel Catbird*. RAFAL GERSZAK FOR THE GLOBE AND MAIL

The Walking Dead. He has been working on *Angel Catbird* since joining the project last May.

Why did you say yes when the opportunity to work with Ms. Atwood came up?

I like the collaborative process of comics. It's really fun batting ideas back and forth and finding a place where sensibilities agree and realize that vision that's an amalgam of two different mindsets. I was really interested in that and collaborating with someone who has had a really long creative career. To dance with someone who has been doing this for so long and see different methods is very intriguing to me.

What's it like working with Ms. Atwood?

She's very professional, as you might imagine, and very open. The collaborations are easy. Things are suggested and she

takes everything in and thinks about things. It's a very easy collaboration, which is really kind of pleasant. It's not a lot of straight dictating this, that or the other. Everyone is open to toss suggestions in. The editor is tossing in things. I am tossing in things. Margaret is tossing in things. We are finding our way to building this world.

Is she a good comic-book writer?

Yes. She is finding her way through it. She moves quickly and decisively through [the project], which is very nice. There's not a lot of hand-wringing with the writing.

Do you think readers of Ms. Atwood's novels will find her voice in this project?

Of course, the prose, for the most part, will be lost. It's mostly just dialogue. For the rest, action will be dictated by the drawings that I

create and, of course, the colours that [colourist Tamara Bonvillian] adds to them. I am reading *The Handmaid's Tale* right now. From what I have read and understood about her reputation in literature, I think this is a little lighter than some people expect. But I think it has the humour and it has the intelligence, but a lot more fun than the expectation of her.

What's the community of comic-book artists like in Vancouver?

It's big and varied. It's kind of amazing. When I first moved to Vancouver, I didn't know anything about the cartooning community here. It's fantastic. There are so many people doing so many great things. We've got an animation community as well and that feeds a lot of people being able to stay within the forum of drawing and expressing through drawing. We've got greats like Brendan Graham and tons of cartoon masters who live where I live in Mount Pleasant. And within a five-block radius, you can throw a stone and hit a cartoonist. It's kind of amazing.

Do you have any interest in the superhero realms of either Marvel or DC?

I won't rule anything out completely right off the top without seeing what the project is. But, on the face of it, those stories don't particularly interest me because they aren't nuanced enough. After a while, I get a little bored of one guy punching another guy in the head for 20 pages. There's not anything there for me.

This interview has been edited and condensed.

FAMILY

Relocating Métis toddler would cause mental harm: foster mother

LAURA KANE VANCOUVER

The foster mother of a two-year-old girl says she fears the toddler will suffer lasting psychological harm if the British Columbia government moves her to Ontario. The woman, who cannot be named, said she always knew that the Ministry of Children and Family Development had planned to move the girl across the country to live with her older siblings, who she has never met. But she said the ministry "mishandled" the case and took too long to make the arrangements. The little girl has bonded with the only family she has ever known.

She and her husband have filed a court petition to stop the ministry from moving the girl. The foster mother is Métis, while the guardians in Ontario are not, raising questions about whether the toddler is better off with biological siblings or with a parent who shares her cultural background. She said fears that if moved, the toddler will suffer reactive attachment disorder, a lasting condition that makes it hard for people to form long-term emotional bonds. "It's been mishandled and the child should not be the one who suffers. This has never been about us, this has always been about the child," she added that the girl's biological parents live in B.C. and support her staying with the foster parents.

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