

RESTAURANTS



CAFE BOMBAY

★★★1/2

Cafe Bombay elbows into a Kitsilano market already saturated with Indian restaurants. This one offers quiet chic, along with light,

Cafe Bombay feels at home in Kits

Healthy ingredients and robust flavours make this a neighbourhood standout

By MIA STAINSBY

fresh food

Lunch, Monday through Saturday, 11 a.m. to 2:30 p.m.; dinner, 5 to 10 p.m.; to 11 p.m. Friday and Saturday. 1809 West First Ave., 604-738-2727

Indian food can leave my stomach feeling like a clogged drain. But not at Cafe Bombay, a chic little cafe in Kitsilano's hip pocket. This is food for healthy eating: It feels light, and the all-important sauces are thickened with pureed vegetables, ground nuts and coconut milk. Spices are rounded and retain distinct, robust flavours. While not perfect, the dishes are compelling, and if I lived in the neighbourhood, Cafe Bombay would be on my personal list of haunts.

The restaurant has clean, spare lines; walls are lined with black-and-white photographs of Bollywood stars and Bombay monuments. A couple of young women cook in the kitchen, under the direction of chef and co-owner Bikram

Singh, who has cooked in five-star hotels in Bombay. And if you're in on a Friday evening, you'll hear James Hamilton play an awesome sitar — shades of Ravi Shankar.

The menu features 16 entrées (seven of them vegetarian), costing \$8 to \$14; 10 appetizers are priced from \$5 to \$13. Lunch specials, which include rice, vegetables and a protein, cost about \$7 and change daily.

I tried a couple of Indian dishes new to me — the "frankie" is Bombay street food, a stuffed pan-fried roti that comes with three very nice dips, the second, an Indian doughnut (mendu vada sambar), made with crushed lentils and served with coriander chutney.

I loved the Kashmiri pulao (basmati rice tossed with nuts, saffron and fried onion), prepared with a delicious, nutty high-grade rice. Lamb vindaloo was fall-apart tender, full of flavour and had obviously been patiently simmered in a long snooze over the stove.

Prawns, cooked in spiced coconut milk, were served in a lovely sauce but were a little tough. Balti subji, a mix of baby corn, peppers, carrots, squash and broccoli (all fresh tasting) with Balti style spices, really shows off the layers of spicing.

The chicken tikka was cooked in a delicious velvety tomato sauce, and the vegetable biryani came loaded with big chunks of grilled vegetables.

In India, there are countless variations on daal (cooked lentils or pulses), from the runny, liquidy style of the south to a thicker stew of the north. I prefer it thick with recognizable bits of lentils, so I wasn't too keen on the soupy version served here. I felt the same about the ricc pudding dessert, which was too runny for my liking.

Keep an eye out for the weekly feature menus, where you might come across dosas, papad chaat (pastries filled with potatoes and spices and covered in yogurt) and other unique delectables.

The wine and beer lists at Cafe Bombay aren't lengthy, but they're appropriate for spicy Indian food. There are six whites and seven reds by the glass.

Sun restaurant critic Mia Stainsby conducts her restaurant visits anonymously. Interviews are done afterwards, by phone. Restaurants are rated out of five stars.

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