

Mark Laba's

Adventures in DINING

THIS WEEK: Café Bombay

WHERE: 1809 W. 1st Ave., Vancouver. **PAYMENT/RESERVATIONS:** Major credit cards, 604-738-2727.
DRINKS: Fully licensed. **HOURS:** Lunch: Mon.-Sat., 11 a.m.-3 p.m. Dinner: Sun.-Thurs., 5 p.m.-10 p.m.; Fri.-Sat., 5 p.m.-11 p.m. **RATINGS OUT OF 4:** Food: ★★½ Service: ★★½
THE BOTTOM LINE: A spice trail of riches with home-cooked goodness and intricate flavours to keep your tastebuds wandering.

I was sitting with The Brain talking turkey a few days ago when he brought me up to speed on the origins of the word and bird throughout history. Though these critters can barely fly, seems like this bird's been on the wing for centuries, criss-crossing the continents in a series of mistaken identities. Mystery most fowl and with more plot twists than the *Murder on the Orient Express*.

Around 1530, this breast-beating strut-ter showed up on dinner platters in England and the Brits believed this tasty treat had arrived from Turkey. Everybody else thought the bird had hopped ship from India because of the merchant trading routes and confusion between India and the New Indies, which was really Mexico and South America.

Persia, Romans and the Greeks have been thrown into the mix and, in Arabic and Hebrew, turkey was known as "the bird of India."

In reality, it's the Aztecs who first cultivated this creature and so the bird's first home is thought to have been Mexico. Everyone got mixed up over this oversized poultry and now I'd joined the bunch with this impromptu history lesson that had me more confused than Vasco de Gama looking for Calicut.

"Let's hit Café Bombay," I said, "and put this bird myth to rest. And if any gobbler shows up, we'll curry the sucker."

Off we went to douse our tastebuds in spices and shake the turkey fat from our heads.

First thing I noticed were the incredibly high ceilings. You could swing from a trapeze upside down and not hit anything. Silvery black-and-white photos of ancient temples and ruins around the room, casually elegant interior with dark comforting tones, flickering candles and padded bench seating along one wall.

"Y'know," The Brain said. "Bollywood's just done a singing-and-dancing version of *Reservoir Dogs*. Supposed to be pretty good, I hear."

"I'd love to see a Bollywood version of *The Ghost and Mr. Chicken*."

"With Don Knotts in a cameo role."

Started with an appetizer of Jhinga Achari (\$11.95), succulent prawns, oven-cooked and laden with a thick granular marinade of achari spices, a zingy masala with a tinge of lemon and fennel and a pickled afterburn.

Great start along with a special of the day, a chef's creation of **papads**, a spicy cracker-like disc topped with a finely chopped mix of potatoes, mint, tamarind sauce and

Pulp chicken



Wayne Leidenfrost — The Province

Chef Bikram Singh shows off two popular Bombay Café dishes, Chicken Frankie Rolls, left, and Harabhara Kebabs.

For me, Kesari Murg, chicken in saffron with a beautiful sauce awash with flavours of cashew, green chili, ginger, coriander, tomato and onion. This was the zamboni of curries, heat-peeling my tongue layer by layer.

yogurt and sprinkled with tiny crunchy noodles (\$6.95). I'm told by owner and chef Bikram Singh it's a staple dish in the food stalls of Bombay. A cool palate sweeper for the main event.

Brain ordered Gosht Vindaloo (\$12.95), hefty lamb chunks marinated in red chili paste and vinegar, adrift in a smooth coconut, onion and tomato gravy. Perfect tightrope walk between the acidic and sweet with spicy netting beneath.

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coriander, tomato and onion. This was the zamboni of curries, heat-peeling my tongue layer by layer.

There's also an incredible Goa-style fish curry (\$10.95) with a hit of mustard seed; Balti Subji (\$9.95), a rich dish of baby corn, carrots, broccoli and other veggies cooked with intricate Balti spicing; and the amazing Palak Paneer with mushrooms (\$9.95), spinach, cheese and masala spices tossed with spinach and bulbous fungus bodies. Truly delicious.

Good way to sample the appetizers is to try the Bombay Platter for Two (\$15.95) with chicken tikka, kakori kebabs of spiced and skewered minced beef, fish fillets of blue hake, spiced with tumeric and breaded in coarse semolina flour for crunch, samosas and more.

And try to fit in the Bombay Salad (\$6.50), a refreshing diversion of mixed greens tangled with shredded chicken tikka, tomato,

onion, cucumber and drizzled with a mayo, mustard, garlic and cucumber house dressing. All entrées include a choice of naan, roti or rice and we sampled each. Roti was outstanding.

Everyone from the salon-buffed to Gore-Tex spiritualists to the tuqued and shirt-tailed wandered in for a sumptuous meal. Pleasant wine listings but we steered towards the beer with Sleeman's Honey Ale (\$5) and Granville Island Winter Ale is on special right now.

For dessert, I highly recommend the Gulab Jamun (\$5.95), delicious pastry spheres fried in ghee, coated in sweet syrup and served up hot with vanilla ice cream.

All-in-all a fantastic feast and not a turkey to be seen as The Brain and I stepped out into the night and headed back to the East Side like a couple of reservoir gluttons after a spice heist.

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