

Some Expert Help with Indian Cooking

Buffets can offer an excellent opportunity to sample an unfamiliar cuisine. But buffets have two major problems: many dishes don't lend themselves well to a buffet, and what you're eating is often a mystery. Ann Arbor's Indian lunch buffets solve the first problem by serving up lots of buffet-friendly vegetable-and-sauce style dishes, but I had to turn to expert help—my friends—to learn more about this cuisine.

First, I have a friend who visited India a few years ago and then recently discovered an array of great Indian recipes on the Web. Being the kind of person who leaps into new projects the way I leap into a pint of Ben & Jerry's, he began cooking exclusively Indian meals for his family. Undaunted by the unfamiliar ingredients or multiple steps for each entree, he printed out recipes that intrigued him, learned to shop for spices like ajwain and hing at Indian groceries, and now makes his own ghee (clarified butter), yogurt, and cheese.

I have another friend who has the Midas touch for cooking. Well, okay, his food doesn't turn to gold, but a dinner at his house will make you feel like royalty. Not only can he create a molé sauce to die for or serve up authentic Ethiopian dishes without batting an eye, but he too has studied and succeeded with Indian cooking. His knowledge of spices and preparations reveals a penchant for reading cookbooks like novels and a memory for details that's worthy of the "\$64,000 Question".

With friends like these, who needs to go to restaurants? But I asked each of them if they would help me learn more about Indian cooking by accompanying me to the Indian lunch buffets and sharing their knowledge.

Raja Rani

The first buffet we tried was at **Raja Rani** (400 S. Division, \$6.95 for buffet). This restaurant is located in a large, old house, so that the dining area—decorated with colorful, bejeweled wall art and set with pink linen tablecloths—is separated into several small rooms. The buffet is served in one such room. The first tables hold the nan (a chewy flat bread that can be used to pick up and eat the other food), two ordinary salads (cucumbers and carrots, pears and apples), a red hot paste with plenty of onions, and a cool cucumber-yogurt sauce. Then a long table of chafing dishes warm at least half a dozen vegetable and chicken preparations. As with any buffet, the selections may change each day, but Raja Rani uses handwritten cards to describe your options. They always serve peas pullao, long grain white rice mixed with green peas, which makes a good bed for all the sauce-based dishes to come. On the day we visited, the next item was zukini dal—"dal" mean-

ing any kind of dried pea or bean. The beans in this dish seemed cooked down into a mush, along with well-cooked zucchini, turnips, eggplant, and red and green peppers, all in a complex, spicy sauce. Although I tried to get my friends' help to identify the spices, one of the first things they clarified is that many Indian dishes have five to ten different spices (cumin, turmeric, coriander seed, etc.), making it difficult to identify what any one sauce might contain. Most dishes, however, begin with the "wet trinity"—garlic, onions, and ginger—and with a "tarka"—oil flavored with some combination of spices.

Raja Rani also served kala chana—small, round, firm beans and onions in a brown sauce—and kari, a tasty, mild dish of doughy balls of chick-pea flour ("besan") wrapped around chopped vegetables in a yellow turmeric-based sauce. The best tasting dish on the table, aloo-shimla mirch (green peppers and potatoes) was apparently everyone's favorite, since it was nearly gone when we arrived at 1:00.

Raja Rani also serves tandoori chicken which is a traditional preparation. Chicken pieces are marinated in yogurt and spices and cooked quickly in a 700-degree clay oven. Red food coloring gives the exterior a pinkish color. The meat is usually more dry than juicy, but it's delicious.

With a plateful of spicy Indian food, you might want to order a plain or mango lassi—a

sweetened yogurt drink, served icy cold and frothy—to cool your palate. The cold fruit salad and yogurt sauce will also help balance the spices.

Shalimar

We don't recommend hopping from one Indian lunch buffet to the next (your stomach won't thank you), but on another day, you might want to try the buffet at **Shalimar** (307 S. Main, \$6.99 for buffet). I've always liked Shalimar's quiet, small interior and its lunch buffet, but an Indian friend of mine once judged that all the dishes taste the same. If so, it's a taste I like.

One of the best dishes they offer is spinach with fried paneer. Paneer is a simple cheese made by boiling milk with lemon juice until it forms curds that are then weighted down to drain off the water and form a solid block. It has a similar texture and appearance to tofu, but tastes like a mild cheese, and it can be fried without melting. Shalimar also serves a potato and eggplant dish, which was tasty but a bit slimy, and a mixed vegetables and bean medley spiced with peppers, cilantro, and whole mustard seeds. Shalimar's tandoori chicken is as good or better than Raja Rani's; their other chicken dish has a rich brown sauce.

Unusual items on their buffet included fried sweet potato chips and deep fried spinach balls that reminded me of hush-puppies. The nan was not impressive, being a bit over-cooked and chewy, but Shalimar's hot sauce—a thick, bright green liquid—fills your mouth with flavor. We guessed it was a mix of cilantro, lemon juice, and jalapeno peppers. It was great with just about everything

Earthen Jar

For a different Indian cooking style and restaurant atmosphere, the **Earthen Jar** (311 S. 5th Ave.) is a quick and easy lunch. You can also have a buffet supper there, because that's all the Earthen Jar ever offers—a constantly refreshed, all-vegetarian buffet that you purchase by the pound (\$2.99/lb). From the clientele, it seems to be a preferred stop for the student crowd, and the relaxed atmosphere (self-serve beverages, paper plates, and a hodge-podge of wooden tables) encourages a come-as-you-are attitude. While we ate, one customer discovered he had left home without his wallet, but the cashier told him to pay tomorrow, since he eats there everyday.

The food is also more relaxed, more like home cooking than restaurant fare. But the Earthen Jar has more choices than most buffets, and warm, soft pieces of nan are served to your table for 50 cents. On the day we went, highlights included a cold spinach and onion salad, chick-peas in a tomato-based sauce, spicy little lentils, brown rice with fried paneer, and broccoli in a thick, rich sauce. They also always have a tray of sweet halvah and a bowl of banana cream pudding to cool your palate. If you find that you like Indian food, the Earthen Jar's accessible and healthy cooking could become a regular addition to your diet.

And perhaps this bit of background on this complex and sophisticated cuisine will make your next Indian meal much less of a mystery than why I've been blessed by such interesting and helpful friends.