

By: Nikki Buchanan

Bombay Spice Grill & Wine

7000 N. 16th St., Phoenix
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When I'm planning a visit to one of the Valley's trendy new restaurants, I've got a million friends. But let me mention going out for Indian food and suddenly, everyone's busy. Although I love the aromatics, heat and textures of this exotic cuisine, I have to admit, Phoenix isn't exactly the poster town for mind-boggling Indian food. Some of our local options are hygienically suspect, many use poor-quality ingredients camouflaged in spicy sauces, and all of them offer nearly identical menus plus the same old lunch buffets.

Bombay Spice, a sleek new Indian restaurant housed in the former Convivo space, sets out to do something completely different, featuring what founder John Kapoor, a practicing M.D. from India, describes as "fresh, healthy, redefined Indian food." Of course, you'll probably deduce the nontraditional orientation long before you read the words on the menu or taste the Indian-inspired-but-not-typically-Indian food, because this clean-lined place bears no resemblance to the Indian restaurant stereotype.

Instead of dust and travel posters of the Taj Majal, you'll find a snappy confluence of modern Indian art and modern American music in a chic, colorful setting that includes both a community table and an elegant wine bar, backlit in glowing chartreuse. And Holy Shiva, here's something new for an Indian restaurant: 40 global wines available at great prices (\$20 per bottle, \$9 per flight, \$6 per glass) plus Kingfisher, Kirin and Fat Tire beer.

The menu tilts trendy American too, offering fast food-like wraps and bowls (both \$8.95) as well as "Bombay tapas" ranging from Indian-style kebabs and samosas to lentil cakes and chickpea ceviche. Like the bowls and wraps, the combo plates - two selections of your choice from 15 meat and vegetarian options - arrive with basmati or brown rice and folded flatbread (called *chapati*), which resembles a whole-wheat tortilla.

As you might expect of a restaurant bring-

ing healthy Indian food to the masses, nothing is particularly spicy. Nevertheless, each modestly priced, artfully presented dish is tasty, especially when doctored up with a sampler of sauces including coriander-mint, curry, sweet-sour tamarind, *raita* (a cooling mix of nonfat yogurt, cucumber and mint) and Bombay Hot (which it really is).

The starters seem to be the most exciting part of the meal. The most interesting selections are found here: small spice-dusted lamb chops, grilled and served three to a plate with coriander-mint sauce (\$9.95); plump lentil-potato cakes with tangy-sweet tamarind sauce for dunking (\$5.95); and chickpea ceviche, a cool salad of garbanzos, red onions, tomatoes and cucumbers, dressed in a light but piquant tamarind-mint-yogurt sauce (\$5.95). I'm also happy with moist shrimp *tikka* (\$8.95) and yogurt-marinated seared scallops (\$9.95), on skewers with bell peppers and onions.

As for those entrée-style plates, bland chicken curry in thin sauce barely makes a blip on my radar, and chicken *tikka* falls woefully short of that smoky-creamy Westernized classic known as chicken *tikka masala*. But I'd order both the cumin-scented spinach with tofu and the roasted eggplant with sautéed onions and tomatoes again. They're simple, healthy and delicious.

Soupy rice pudding, redolent with ground cardamom and garnished with chopped pistachios, is probably the most authentically rendered dish on the menu, and it's irresistible, while a soft, warm "soufflé" of sweet shredded carrots, mixed with ricotta cheese and cardamom, is yummy and healthy, too.

If you love the heavy richness of gut-bomb Indian food, Bombay Spice's dairy-free, olive-oiled vision of India-Lite may not suit you. I, for one, miss the stronger seasonings and voluptuous sauces, as well as the springy, un-aged cheese known as *paneer* and of course, buttery garlic *naan*, my favorite gravy-mop. But when I take Bombay Spice for what it is (in so many ways, a vast improvement over its dreary forebears), I can't help but appreciate the difference.

Hours: 11 a.m. to 10 p.m., Sunday through Thursday, 11 a.m. to 11 p.m., Friday and Saturday.