

Restaurant Review: Mughal Palace

Proof that good things come in (deceptively) small packages

BY DINA CHENEY PUBLISHED JULY 1, 2005 AT 12:00 AM

Palatial in All the Ways That Matter

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The basmati rice may not be served in hammered copper bowls in a plush dining room sporting damask-covered banquettes, but in my book the fine food and service at Mughal Palace, across from the Valhalla train station, make it one of the county's top Indian restaurants.

The extensive menu spans North and South India, and incorporates Muglai cuisine, which fuses Indian and Middle-Eastern elements. So, along with very well-prepared renditions of chicken tikka masala and sag paneer, you'll find traditional Muglai dishes that might be new to you: coriander-scented lamb kabobs and rice pudding infused with saffron and rosewater, for instance. Here, too, the basmati rice brings in aspects of the Middle East; topped with fried onions, golden raisins, chopped pistachios, and cherry slivers, it is fit for a Persian queen.

Nearly every dish my dining companions and I tried soared to such regal heights: the pappadam couldn't have been lighter or crispier, the mint chutney fresher or tangier, the tamarind sauce sweeter or more flavorful. Both the minced lamb and vegetable samosas featured flaky pastry and flavor-rich fillings, and the textbook-perfect lassi, a dense yogurt drink, was sweet, creamy, and intense with mango flavor. (If you prefer an alcoholic beverage, the restaurant also has a full bar and offers beer, as well as several wines by the glass.)

Though generous with spices, the kitchen was somewhat sparing in its use of cream, which I appreciated: the lamb Mangolorian featured a pumpkin-hued coconut-ginger sauce and the beef rogan josh sang with Kashmiri masala, a mix of paprika, cumin, clove, and onion gravy. My only criticism: some of the beef cubes could have been more tender. And the accompanying complimentary dal (lentils) would have benefited from a touch more salt.

Noticing that several patrons ordered tandoori dishes, we followed suit, opting for the tandoori mixed grill, and we were pleased with our choice. Our waiter brought over a sizzling pan and, with tongs, transferred marinated and roasted lamb cubes, chicken kebabs, tandoori shrimp, brilliant poppy-red tandoori chicken, and lamb kebabs to a plate, topping them with onions, peppers, and a lemon wedge. (Be sure to squeeze the citrus juice over the meat for a bright contrasting note.)

Being a traditional Muglai dish, the Muglai biriyani was a must-try and didn't disappoint. The moist dish combined basmati rice, dark-meat chicken, mixed dried fruit, nuts, herbs, and spices, including saffron. Sampled with the sweet, slightly spicy raita, the dish was compelling.

A South Indian staple, the restaurant's masala dosa was crisp, with a high ratio of flavorful spiced potato-and-pea filling to dough. And the accompanying sweet and creamy coconut chutney was just as noteworthy.

Warm, fresh bread is a draw for every fan of Indian cuisine I know, and Mughal Palace impressed us on this front as well. The poori bread arrived in the form of a massive balloon, and, upon deflation, was both flavorful and crisp (try it with the sweet, intense mango chutney). The Peshawari nan was as gem-studded as the basmati rice—stuffed with nuts, raisins, and dried cherries, it just might be the most delicious Indian bread I've ever tasted.

Though sated, we couldn't skip dessert. The delicate rasmalai was delicious: two soft disks of simmered cheese served in a milky rosewater-kissed sugar syrup. Similarly, the gulab jamun featured two syrup-steeped balls of fried cheese—the warm balls, similar to doughnut holes, had absorbed the syrup's sweet floral essence. In both cases, though, I would have appreciated larger portions. On the other hand, we could have skipped the artificially green kulfi, with chopped fruits and nuts.

MUGHAL PALACE

16 Broadway, Valhalla
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HOURS:

Lunch, Mon. to Sat. 11:30 am-2:30 pm, Sun 12-3 pm
Dinner, Mon. to Thurs. 5-10 pm, Fri. and Sat. 5-10:30 pm, Sun. 5-9:30 pm