



iVillage

PUFFED AND FLUFFY, GLEAMING WITH A HINT OF BUTTER AND BEARING DEEP golden scars from direct contact with a very hot oven, this was no ordinary naan bread. Gorgeous soft wedges were tucked into a silver basket and more than a hint of garlic wafted around. The perfect implement to scoop up mouthfuls of an array of deliciously prepared curries and tasty rice dishes. We were hooked.

But first things first. iVillage at Victoria is about to celebrate its first birthday. That's a whole year that's passed since the effervescent Dimple (as she is known) set up one of Auckland's most sophisticated and popular Indian themed restaurants in the renovated Victoria Market. The colonial brickwork surrounding the restaurant, sandblasted clean makes quite a bright statement. Step in from this warm courtyard and that theme continues into the restaurant with an assortment of Indian decorations with silk, cane, brass and wooden artefacts that combine to lend colour, atmosphere and intrigue to those brick walls. And with an extensive menu of delightful cooked-from-scratch fresh food, this has become the go-to place for Indian meals.

Dimple who hails from the Gujarati region of India presides over the restaurant and knows her stuff. She cooked for five years as a chef at the old Killarney St in Takapuna and has since owned several small Indian restaurants in and around the North Shore. Concentrating on just one place now, aided by her son, she's currently cutting back the inaugural enormous menu and plans to introduce even further innovation by way of tandoori lobsters, fish and more.

The place has two faces. On the upper level (one step up) the bar is a comfortable place offering its own menu. Sit up on stool and watch the bar chef weave his magic. With a great menu of bar snacks, a tandoori oven and selections from a terrific wine, beer and cocktail list, the hours will slip by. And here's the thing; these wines are well selected and offered at affordable prices. More than a dozen aromatic wines, riesling and gewürztraminer to suit the food, along with favourite chardonnays, sav blancs, the ubiquitous pinot gris and a grand selection of stunning reds are priced better than most restaurants within a 10km radius.

The other section of the dining room looks toward the main kitchen where the chefs are decked in tall white toques. These guys are the real deal. Dimple has had several of them cooking with her from her former businesses and they're all skilled in the northern Indian cuisine in which the restaurant specialises.

Start with the innovative I-Bullets, an Indo Chinese specialty being served at almost every table, every night. These cigar shaped cylinders are a secret recipe, (vegetarian for sure with lots of herbs) and come in a crisp pile accompanied by a coriander and mint dipping sauce. They're not quite like anything encountered anywhere, don't look particularly attractive, but they're really more-ish and disappear ever so quickly. The other item not to miss is the Tandoori Trio. Three generous pieces of free range chicken are marinated; botti tikka, hara and malai, cooked in the tandoor and appear at the table on a skewer that sits atop a magnificent charcoal fuelled amphora with soft smoke billowing out in clouds to perfume the room (see picture). Whether you're a vegetarian or a carnivore there's plenty of choice at the bar and with most items at under \$15 you can feast like a maharajah.

From the main dining menu, both curries and tandoori dishes feature. Northern Indian cuisine is a gentle way of cooking. Lots of yogurt, ginger, garlic and soft spices dominate the dishes, rather than the more fiery chilli found in the south. But that doesn't mean things are bland. Far from it as there's subtle spicing in everything and if so requested the heat can be turned up in any dish. But why, I ask as a chilli lover who likes to taste other flavours too? And if you're hooked on butter chicken, forget that for a night. This lighter style of Indian cooking has none of the cream that has been introduced for western palates. Who needed that anyway?

Don't miss a wonderfully aromatic Himalayan Hariyali, where masses of spinach is blended and combined with mushrooms and soft white paneer cheese making it the perfect vegetarian dish, and there's a multitude of others making healthy light eating. Or any fish dish that's quickly cooked in the tandoor, with a fragrant marinade and served piping hot. The prawn dishes are wonderful and the selection of meaty goat, chicken or lamb curries, whether sloppy with sauce or served in a more dry style is extensive. There's also a good selection of accompaniments that make an Indian meal so interesting including rice cooked several ways, tandoor cooked breads and tasty stuffed naan and the classic biriyani rice dishes.



My recommendation for an evening at iVillage is to find a group of friends to go with so that the full extent of the menu can be enjoyed. It is open for dinner seven nights (yay!) and for lunch Tuesday to Friday. Bar menu from 4pm and better still, no surcharge on public holidays. (LAURAIN JACOBS) PN

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