

LET'S EAT

A passage to Indian perfection

By Peter Calder

IVillage at Victoria

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I often eat Indian food. Professionally, however, I tend to steer away from Indian restaurants for the simple reason that it's hard to fill a column with a report about eating at one.

The food is either good or it's not — and mostly it is. The scope for variation is narrow and it would take forensic analysis to determine what was different about this lamb vindaloo or that masala dosa.

But I had kept hearing reports about this place in the perpetually redeveloping Victoria Park and, having just booked a passage to India of my own, thought it time to drag the Professor and a couple of mates along for a look. We encountered what might seem a contradiction in terms: Indian fine dining.

I mean no disrespect here. I remarked a few weeks back that it is hard to find elite Chinese dining experiences in Auckland (no coals of fire have yet been heaped on my head for saying so) and, in my experience at least, the same may be said for Indian food. Its down-to-earth quality is one of its virtues, and the best Indian food I have had is in places that use family recipes (and, often, family members) in the kitchen.

IVillage by contrast aims at the high end, and nails it. This does not mean eye-watering expense. Our quartet had the degustation at \$60 a head but the main-size curries are about the same price as at your local.

A year old last month, IVillage is the brainchild of Dimple Girish, from Ahmedabad in Gujarat, who ran a similarly named restaurant in the Manly shops. She has taken enormous trouble with the decor, starting outside the main door with a Rajasthani ox-cart that would have once been used to bring in the harvest.

This meant leaping through official hoops of the Forests Department in India and MAF here but she says she was determined to have it. She spent time and money sourcing other heritage items which adorn the brick walls of the heritage building, albeit in rather haphazard fashion: sari silks, handbeaten copper, a carved door. Every single item in the



Minhaz Ahmed, Dimple Girish and Siva Kumar will delight you with their cuisine.

DOUG SHERRING



Verdict: As good as it gets

restaurant, including the furniture and tableware, is from India, said Dimple's son Smeeta, our stylish and humorous waiter.

The same trouble has been taken in the kitchen, where chefs from Kolkata, Mumbai, Nepal and Tamil Nadu have the subcontinent pretty much covered. We were lavished with an array of dishes that featured ingredients I was familiar with, in patterns I was not.

A platter of poppadoms included ones made with puffed sago, like rice crackers and came with onion jam and yoghurt dip; the dense cottage cheese called paneer was sliced into discs to make tiny sandwiches of mint chutney, browned in the tandoor oven; also from the tandoor came a trio of chicken thigh pieces with various coatings (I remember cream cheese, mint and coriander).

The kitchen's take on the kebab, which is a staple of every cuisine between the Adriatic and the Irrawaddy, was to blend very good lamb mince with bell peppers. I had kept back a dish of the minty dipping sauce that had come with the paneer, which went perfectly with it.

By this time the side plate I was eating from

resembled a work by Kandinsky or Pollock but more was to come: prawns marinated in plum lent a real density to what can be a bland meat; scallops, dusted with a piquant gunpowder spice before being pan-fried and served on mild tomato curry, miraculously maintained their distinctive taste; a dish of chicken livers with apricots, pepper and fresh green chillies was a special treat.

Among the main dishes, a balti goat curry stood out for its richness and the melting succulence of the shoulder meat. A prawn dish in a style inspired by the Malabar coast in northern Kerala was cooked in coconut cream with capsicum and was just the thing to soak the last of the delicious cumin-flavoured basmati.

We finished with a quartet of tiny kulfi, the frozen dessert that is India's answer to icecream. Even here there were surprises in store: alongside the conventional pistachio and mango were ones flavoured with fennel and betel leaves.

It was a perfect end to a terrific meal which, though pricier than your average Indian, was a whole new experience. Go soon.

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