

LAS VEGAS WEEKLY

TASTE: FOOLISH LAS VEGANS!

Don't let fear of the unfamiliar stop you from trying the terrific food at

Origin India

By Max Jacobson

ORIGIN INDIA 4480 PARADISE ROAD, 734-6342. Hours: 11:30 a.m.-11:30 p.m. daily. Suggested dishes: Dahi ke kebab, \$5.95; Anarkali papri chat, \$5.95; pudinha champ, \$12.95; paneer shabzam, \$13.95; murg bemisal, \$16.95.



Sometimes I brag about Vegas having morphed into an ethnic food destination that rivals the bigger American cities. Then I visit a place like Origin India and wonder why there are so many empty tables. If this were a just world, or even Los Angeles, the place would be full every evening.

Whoever designed the place is a real showman. The décor features a wood floor, hand-carved pillars, a gallery's worth of stunning Indian paintings, faux marble sconces that recall the Taj Majal and soothing pastel colors. Furnished with dark, wooden tables and brown leather chairs, this is as pretty and comfortable an Indian restaurant as I've ever seen.

And the food, by veteran chef Vinod Ahuja, is arguably the most creative, most colorful Indian food that Vegas has yet seen.

In spite of all this, it's clear the restaurant is struggling. (One Saturday afternoon, I saw someone wearing a sandwich board, advertising the restaurant on Paradise Road.) Why isn't it doing better? I can't decide. Perhaps it is because Indian cuisine is still so unfamiliar. Maybe this food is just plain too good.

The restaurant belongs to a young British couple that also owns restaurants in the U.K. As in that country, they serve a menu of dishes that revolve around the savory, meat-rich cooking of North India, augmented by spicy vegetarian dishes, breads cooked in a clay oven called a tandoor and gooey, milk-based desserts.

Very few people look the part of the chef more than the large, ebullient Ahuja, who has been involved in setting up more than 175 hotels, restaurants and fast-food joints

in India and abroad. On a recent visit to Origin India, I put myself in his hands as he prepares several dishes that I have never tasted before, much less imagined.

Candles flicker from chandeliers that look like giant candle holders as we settle into a plate of the obligatory papadum, crunchy, oily lentil-flour wafers with a peppery bite. You eat them with two flavorful house chutneys, a mint-green one based on cilantro and a murky reddish-brown paste made from tamarind seed.

As one of my friends is a vegetarian, the chef has decided to start us off with an appetizer trio. Potli samosas are pastry triangles shaped like a beggar's purse and filled with a spicy cauliflower-potato mixture. Dahi ke kabab are melt-in-the-mouth patties based on dried yogurt. Anarkali papri chat, an Indian street snack made with whole-wheat wafers and potatoes tossed with chickpeas, yogurt, mint and plum sauce, is the perfect match for icy Indian beer, which cuts the pungent flavors like a sharp knife.

Chef Ahuja hasn't neglected our lust for meat, though. First he sends out pudhina champ, baby lamb chops from the rack, crusted with spice and redolent of mint, flat out one of the best lamb dishes anywhere. Then comes the seasoned lamb patties called Lahori chapli kebab; and murg paras kebab, fresh turmeric-grilled chicken, flavored with roasted fennel powder. None of these three dishes, incidentally, is available anywhere else in a Vegas Indian restaurant, and all three are amazing.

But these are merely the appetizers. For vegetarian entrées, we have paneer shabnam, homemade farmer's cheese cooked with green garlic, ginger and fresh basil, in an ultrarich sauce that was made to

be spooned onto fragrant basmati rice. Then there is baigan dahiwala, slightly charred eggplant cooked in a yogurt-cashew sauce. And, of course, the rice and daal (stewed lentils) are fabulous. In fact, this may be the best Indian food I have had outside London in almost a decade.

Because of our vegetarian guest, the non-veg entrées are limited to one this evening, a piece of pepper-grilled sea bass, made with South Indian spices, which taste different from the North Indian spicing but which I am unable to identify.

On other occasions, though, I have tried such diverse items as shalgam gosht, lamb stewed with turnips (one of my favorite vegetables and one that is sorely neglected), and a strangely appealing dish called murg bemisal, made with minced chicken, char-grilled chicken, cooked egg, cilantro and cherry tomatoes.

Naturally, there are those wonderful Indian breads, and here, too, the chef displays his creativity. Keema naan is a pounded flatbread, first stuffed with minced lamb, then slapped onto the sides of the cylindrical clay oven until it puffs and blackens. If it's a rice dish you crave, you can't do much better than Kabuli pulao, long-grain basmati rice with split lentils mixed in. Think of it as Indian Rice-A-Roni.

I'm not big on Indian desserts—most of them, based on boiled milk and sugar, are cloying. But even these desserts are unusual. Full marks for creativity on a dessert based on beet root, even though I didn't care for it. Chana dal ka halwa, though, a fudgy creation made from garbanzo beans, is a wonderful treat.

So too, is Origin India.