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Indian spice

Haandi merges northern and southern Indian cuisine in Livonia



MT PHOTO: ROB WIDDIS
Methi tikka, front left, and malai tikka, front right

BY JANE SLAUGHTER

Why drive to the western end of the world — Newburgh Road — to eat at Haandi? It's a little more expensive than some Indian restaurants, with most meat entrées at \$14 or \$15 and most vegetarian ones at \$10 or \$11, but it has a full bar, including Indian beers and wines, and a quiet, cloth-napkin atmosphere. You get naan with your meal, so you're saving \$3 or \$4 right there. What recommended Haandi to me, out of so many others, was the intense and multifaceted flavors of most of the dishes I tried. A simple mango lassi is so deeply mango-colored, so deeply mango-flavored, it's like mango lassi on steroids.

The menu is very long — 111 dishes plus desserts — which should tempt you to get past the standard kormas and tikkas. Owner Rakesh Sabharwal, who helps out in the kitchen, comes from north of New Delhi, and most of his cuisine is northern, but he also features a few Hyderabadi dishes (the majority-Muslim city of Hyderabad is toward the south). His lamb Hyderabadi is one of my favorite Indian dishes of all time. It's cooked in coconut milk and cream, with poppy seeds, so it's creamy, as you'd expect, but with a kick that lifts it out of the ordinary. Sabharwal says this is also a favorite of his customers, about half of whom are Indian.

Haandi Cuisine of India

Phone: 734-432-2088
Address: 37116 Six Mile Rd.
Livonia, MI 48152

More on Haandi Cuisine of India.

A dish that's both southern and northern is the appetizer *hara kebab*. Its vibrant green patties made from pounded spinach, along with potatoes, peas and *paneer* (cheese), and it's terrific with an intensely fresh mint chutney.

Samosas and pakoras are done well, but more unusual around here are the *samosa chaat* and the chilly pakora. The latter isn't served cold — it's a very hot chile dipped in gram batter and fried. (Gram flour is made from roasted chickpeas.) The chaat is pieces of samosa, which retain their crispness despite being drowned in a sauce of yogurt, spiced whole chickpeas, tamarind chutney, and mint sauce. It's not pretty to look at, but it's a riot of different flavors — the chickpeas tasting of cumin, the samosas flaky.

I loved the house specialty, lamb Haandi, which is Sabharwal's own recipe. He fries onions till they're very brown, adds tomatoes and green pepper, and spices it with coriander and paprika, among others. It's deep and dusky, tomatoey and complex.

Almost as good is *methi* lamb, made with roasted fenugreek leaves (*methi* means fenugreek). The deep green sauce is slightly salty and rather intricate. Sabharwal explained that he has to be careful with the fenugreek, which can turn bitter when cooked; a 25-75 fenugreek-spinach ratio is ideal.

I had less luck with the two vegetarian entrées I tried. Eggplant and mushrooms are two of my pet foods, so I ordered *baigan bhatha* (roasted eggplant mashed with onions and tomatoes) and mushroom *muttar*, but in neither was the flavor of the main ingredient obvious. Both were more of an undifferentiated spicy, not bad, but not something to order a second time.

Some other dishes that you might not see every day are a sweet corn soup, Goan fish curry and *bharwan simla mirch*, which is a green pepper stuffed with paneer, potato, peas, cashews, cilantro and ginger, grilled on the tandoor using Sabharwal's special recipe.

For dessert I enjoyed *gajjar halwa*, which is grated carrots (50 pounds at a time) cooked for three to four hours in milk. When the consistency is pudding-like, sugar is added and it's topped with almonds. It tastes like honey. Besides the usual rice pudding and *gulab jamun*, several house-made ice creams are available, including mango.

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