

Culinary Corner



Uniquely delicious, that's Blue Taj

by Charles Jenkin
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First he opened Nawab in Roanoke, Va. That was way back in 1997. It's still going strong. Pannu Singh obviously not only knows the cuisine of India, he knows how folks like it, regardless of their heritage. With chef Naveen Sadana and consulting chef Mel Oza, Pannu headed south and decided to open Copper-Indian Cuisine on East Boulevard in Dilworth. That was in 2005. If you've been to Copper, as busy as ever, you know of the excellent dining experience offered.

Have you ever gone to a restaurant that was a bit of a drive and you enjoyed it enough to say to the owner, "you need to open one of these in our neighborhood." Well, enough people from south Charlotte and the Ballantyne area obviously said just those words to Pannu. There was a need for Indian fare, so in February 2010, Pannu, with the help of chef/partner Kuldip Gill, opened Blue Taj in the Ballantyne Village shopping center, 14815 Ballantyne Village Way (formerly the home of Vesuvius Pizza).

For a while, the menu was rather eclectic, with dishes from around the world. Patrons said they wanted something closer to the great Indian cuisine of Copper, and Pannu happily complied. The full dining rooms, especially on the weekends these days, indicate Pannu has a third hit restaurant on his hands.

Speaking of dining rooms, the look of Blue Taj may truly be unlike any other restaurant you have experienced. It is unique, surprising,

embracing and very cozy. There are three dining rooms, not including the enclosed patio, the Cabana, along with a bar. When you first enter, you notice the large glass wine cellar, which holds 1,000 bottles. The wine list is very robust, even by the glass, and reasonably priced, as is the entire menu. The dining room you glance upon to the left is the Parlor. It has a French décor of red accent over white walls and very comfortable red and white padded chairs with sleek wood tables.

To the right of the Parlor is the Chi room with its Scandinavian décor. Sleek tables for two hug the walls, with contemporary blue-padded and wood-back seating. The third dining room is the Leela room with a modern industrial look. The wall has a dramatic huge machine gear mural and green-tinted backlighting above. That leaves the Bubble bar, so named for the bubbles on the wall and the offerings of bubbly on the menu. It also is neatly back lit and has an almost hidden cozy table for two around the corner. Like I said, I don't think you'll ever see another place like this.

Very cool and intriguing interiors are great and can help create a wonderful dining experience, provided the dishes are very good. As

(See Blue Taj on page 25)



Charles Jenkin/
SCW photos

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Culinary Corner

Blue Taj

(continued from page 24)

Blue Taj begins its second year. I can say I have tasted the menu improve deliciously in the past 12 months. Consider starting with an order of Naan, the Indian bread, with the accompaniments of the cool mint chutney and the raita (a yummy yogurt dip) – a tasty change from bread and butter.

For appetizers, if you like shrimp, you'll love the Malai ka Jhinga – jumbo prawns marinated in spices and cream, then roasted in the Tandoor and served with Hyderabad tomato chutney. The shrimp are perfectly cooked and tender, the flavors splendid. A tandoor is a cylindrical clay oven for cooking and baking. Also inviting is the Mustard Tawa lamb – julienne of roasted lamb sautéed in a mustard-red chilies-yogurt and-peppercorn paste, a harmony of flavors to complement the tender pieces of meat. There are plenty of vegetarian options, like the Chatpate Tikki Chole – spiced potato patties served over a bed of zesty garbanzo beans stew and topped with a duo of mint and tamarind chutneys. Again, tasty flavor and texture combos.

Entrée choices fall under three main categories: tawa, roasted and tandoori selections; seafood, chicken and lamb classics; and vegetarian options. Once you read the description and confer with your server, you can have great confidence you will enjoy your choice. My personal favorites include the Tawa-Curry Leaf Scallops. Pan-seared and succulent, these pearls from the sea are scented with curry leaf slivers and coarsely-ground fresh toasted spices.

For the lamb lover, I highly recommend the Frontier Lamb Chops – a Frenched rack of lamb marinated in a mustard-chili-and-ginger marinade, seared first and then roasted. I've been fortunate enough to taste this item on three occasions (always say yes when asked if you want a bite), and each time the chops are superb. One more to try; the Chicken Tikka Masala, with chunks of roasted chicken breast simmered in a velvety creamed tomato sauce that's scented with fenugreek, an herb used in curries. Very tender chicken and the sauce, well, you'll need some extra naan to sop it up.

There's a long list of vegetarian entrées, like the Leek Kofta – croquettes of potatoes and leeks in cashew tomato sauce. Additionally, there are rice dish offerings: aromatic basmati rice cooked with spices, herbs and crispy onions: or with shrimp, chicken or lamb.

For dessert, order the Taj sampler, an assortment of sweet treats, including Gulab Jamun, which are pastry balls dipped in honey syrup, garnished with dry coconut. If you're not familiar with Indian cuisine, fear not. If you can't decide, with servers like Bhim Thapa, just tell him what you like, and he will have them prepare a dish you are sure to enjoy. I think that is a delightful approach!

As Blue Taj gains in popularity, its only real challenge is to maintain a high level of service. There have been times when the wait between courses was a bit too long. The saying "worth waiting for" is most appropriate, as the food is consistently delicious. I could suggest you go on a week night or early on the weekend, or for the fast express lunch, yet I won't. They are so close to having it down, go when you like and experience the wonderful flavors of India. □

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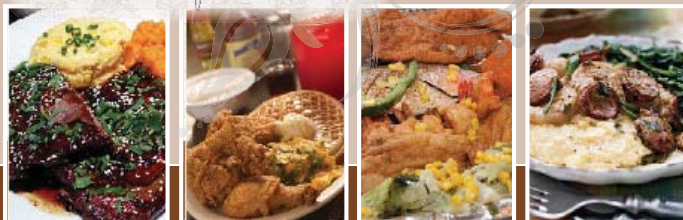
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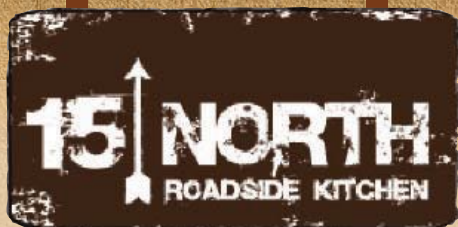


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