

Taj Mahal has spicy fare at reasonable prices

Several friends over the past month or two had told me about the Taj Mahal restaurant, located at 5640 Calgary Trail. They said the food was excellent, the prices were reasonable and the decor superb.

When it comes to East Indian cuisine, my resident expert is ITV news anchor, Jacqueline Clark, who has been a celebrity Dining Out guest of mine in the past. Her family spent some time there and are all apparently culinary masters of spicy foods. Jacqueline also claims to be a curry connoisseur par excellence.

At any rate, we agreed to tackle the Taj Mahal. Armed with a real live expert, I felt confident that it would get a thorough review, yet intimidated by knowledge that clearly superseded my own.

We found that lunch consists of a buffet. As far as buffets go, the price is absolutely unbeatable. However, at lunch one can not order from the menu.

The selections that made up the buffet ranged from quite good to very good. There was Aloo Ghobi, which is a potato curry. This is a particularly hot dish. I waited for Jacqueline's first official comments.

"It's nice," she said in a monotone voice.

"Nice?" I asked.

"Yeah, quite nice" she repeated.

I was beginning to wonder whether I should have more deeply checked the qualifications of my hot-shot expert. Luckily, she eventually elaborated on "quite nice."

Jacqueline said that the Aloo Ghobi would have been richer if it had a little cauliflower and onions as well. She emphasized that many of us tend to forget the subtleties of flavor combinations just because the dominating taste is curry.

As we tasted the other buffet items, I realized she was right. If one concentrates beyond the curry and whether it is hot or mild, one will find the flavor combinations that we enjoy in other types of cuisine.

Knowing this, I could well understand what she meant about the Aloo Ghobi not being as rich as it could be.

The hit of the lunch were the onion Pakoras. These are little appetizers that in Jacqueline's words are "to kill for." We've both had them in other curry and East Indian restaurants and both agreed that these are as good as, or better than, any we tried thus far.

The beef curry and the vegetable curry offerings were milder than the Aloo Ghobi. Each curry was considerably different and Jacqueline took me through a mini curry appreciation course. To the credit of the Taj Mahal, the flavor combinations were very agreeable.

Many places can have selections that are fine on their own,



Pete Desrochers

Dining Out

but don't match with others. The Taj Mahal seems to have some solid expertise in anticipating what the public likes.

For dessert we tried the traditional Gulab Jamun. These are sweet dough balls which are soaked in a sugar syrup. The sugar syrup had a pleasant and intriguing taste; but the dough balls themselves were clearly not fresh. In all honesty, neither of us could award passing marks on this one.

However, the other dessert was sensational. This one is called Ras Malai. Even describing it is difficult. Basically it is a cold, cheese-based dessert, uniquely sweetened and very creamy. Absolutely delicious.

Noting my obvious delight with the Ras Malai, Jacqueline went on to say that this, too, is a traditional dessert. Many desserts are similar in that they soothe the burning palate from any residue curry far more effectively than any beverage.

The total lunch, including dessert, coffee and wine was just over the \$20 zone. The price is unbeatable for what you get.

BEST POINTS: Pakoras, Ras Malai, good service, wonderful decor, unbeatable buffet price.

AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT: The dough balls just didn't cut it and Jacqueline wondered about the ingredient selection in a couple of dishes. The dinner menu looked quite alluring - too bad we couldn't sample some of their better offerings at lunch.

RATING CATEGORY: Jacqueline and I both came up with a 7.5 out of 10. Chances are that if we had come at dinner it might score higher. Still, it is clearly a credible restaurant that provides south-side diners with interesting taste alternatives. It also was exposed to more in-depth scrutiny than what I could have done on my own with respect to East Indian cuisine.