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## RESTAURANT

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Review

### Friendly flavour

Humble exterior conceals a Subcontinental gem

#### JEWEL OF KASHMIR

7219 - 104 St., 438-4646

\*\*\*\* (out of five)

I'm probably not alone amongst Canadians of my ethnosocioeconomic extraction in having tasted my first Indian food rather late in life. I grew up in small-town Ontario, raised by strict blandetarians – I didn't even use black pepper until I was a teenager—whose dietary regimen was reinforced by the family predisposition for sprouting ulcers. Aside from the occasional ersatz casserole proffered by neighbours who arbitrarily drew on the spices of the subcontinent to enliven their unappetizing gouaches of broccoli, raisins, mayonnaise and cheddar, my stomach was innocent of the perfumey and potent components of curries, dahls, biryanis, vindaloos and other Indian fare until early adulthood.

And since I'm not the only one who waited so long to be initiated into the exotic secrets of Indian cuisine, I'm sure I'm not alone in the experience of trepidation and awe that comes with that first Indian meal. As for many Edmontonians, New Asian Village was the site of my deflowering. It's moments like this when one is brought face to face with one's own parochial tastes and subliminally xenophobic outlook. First: the vertigo instilled by bewildering variety of selection available on just about any Indian menu. Next: the nervousness brought about by selecting the right level of spiciness. Then: the dismay at the apparently small portions of each dish. Followed by: the discomfort from gobbling so much rich food and discovering how filling a small portion can be. And finally: the gastrointestinal distress born of the above cycle.

The final stage is actually the realization that you've been missing out on such delicious food for so long and the determination to make up for lost time. And yet, despite my avowal to make the most of what time I have left, I had never before visited Jewel of Kashmir until just recently. An unassuming little stucco structure on Calgary Trail South, its humble facade belies the quality of food and service you can expect inside (provided you're not in a huge hurry). Cozy and comfortable, decorated with a disparate array of Indian ornaments, stuffed animals and portraits of small-c celebrities (Jamie Farr, Anson Williams, Avery Schrieber) who have enjoyed the fruits of chef Tariq Khatib's kitchen, it's the sort of place you can linger and enjoy the graciousness of your hosts.

My co-diners and I were putting the restaurant to more than the usual test, however. We had a toddler in tow, a living, wriggling challenge to any restaurant's ability to accommodate its guests.

Our server was instantly smitten with the youngster—he is a rather adorable boy—and assuaged any incipient crankiness with a large platter of spice-free food (rice, potatoes, cucumber, carrots, naan), compliments of the house. How nice is that? Chef Tariq himself emerged to greet us and jokingly enjoin the lad to come back when he's older and try the regular menu.

The grown-ups were rather keen to do just that and, upon the receipt of frosty glasses of beer, ordered up a feast: vegetable pakoras (\$4.95) and garlic naan (\$2.95) to start, followed by saag paneer (\$11.95), aloo gobi (\$9.95), butter chicken (\$11.95), channa dahl (\$9.95) and saffron rice (\$4.95). We opted for a level of medium spiciness.

The pakoras arrived first, veggies fried in a crisp and crumbly chickpea flour coating, served with tamarind sauce and cilantro chutney. Next came the fragrant garlic naan, soft enough to sop up the sauces to come, but with a crisp-grilled underside. Then the main dishes: I joked to my friends that the saag paneer was like a shot of wheatgrass juice, a dark green stew of spinach and broccoli concealing cubes of creamy homemade cheese. Aloo gobi combines succulent cauliflower and melting potato morsels in a bright yellow curry. Channa dahl is a lentil dish in which the pulses are simmered to smooth softness with spices and stewed tomatoes. The butter chicken featured tender chunks of the eponymous poultry immersed in a silken, spicy butter sauce.

The rest of the meal is a bit of a blur as we spooned the above dishes over heaps of steaming saffron rice and slipped into our individual blissful reveries, telltale beads of perspiration amassing on our respective brows. Medium spicy at Jewel of Kashmir confers a fair amount of fire, just so you know, especially cumulatively, but the heat was deftly balanced with the overall flavour and there's always the raita and bread to cool you down. When the dust settled and we sat patting our sated bellies, we'd probably eaten about half of what we ordered. Dessert was totally out of the question, but cups of sweet aromatic chai (\$1.95) were enjoyed all around to top off the meal.

Not only did they coddle their youngest patron with flying colours, the chef and server acquitted themselves brilliantly in the hospitality department and sent us away with enough leftovers for all of us to enjoy the food again the next day.

SCOTT LINGLEY