

## A fine balance

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Date: 07/09/2002  
Words: 1076

Publication: Sydney Morning Herald  
Section: Metropolitan

### RESTAURANT REVIEW

Abhi's Indian Restaurant,  
Concord, Saturday dinner  
163 Concord Road, Concord, 9743 3061.

The kitchen alchemists have turned up the heat and, writes [Helen Greenwood](#), all is well.

In our household we play a game called Why Is There Chilli In This? In the takeaway potato gratin from a groovy inner-city foodery (clearly a mistake), for example. Or the wonderful rolled spicy Polish pork from our local deli (actually, not bad). Or the risotto with cabbage and pancetta from a current cafe hot spot (divine, but I could happily have dispensed with those hot red flakes). Sydney is so obsessed with chilli that when you order scrambled eggs you have to ask, is there chilli in this?

No need to ask at Abhi's. As Kumar Mahadevan, the owner with the flashing smile, tells us, there is chilli in everything and it belongs there.

Mahadevan is a charming and loquacious man, bouncing from table to table in a room that is full on Bledisloe Cup night. It's still early, about 7, and already it's a trying night - no pun intended. A woman has arrived and announced she can't go up the stairs for medical reasons. All the downstairs tables are spoken for and he has to sort out the dilemma. Upstairs, a bloke has brought McDonald's for the kids. They won't eat anything else, he tells Mahadevan, who is justly offended. He has politely and firmly told the man "no". We speculate on what a McDonald's might do if you arrived with Indian food and insisted on eating it.

Still in high spirits, our ebullient host bounces back to the front door to welcome the punters who are pouring in. The room is dominated by a huge aubergine-tinted wall with a damask-like print. There are tea lights on the tables and a brightly lit, handsome kitchen where men whip around in black-and-white check hats, sprinkle powders like alchemists and step back as flames leap into the air.

Entrees are in full flight and bottles uncorked. Buying wine for Indian food (Abhi's is BYO as well as licensed) is an interesting exercise. Tradition suggests a full-blown, fruity red. Contemporary thought espoused by a bloke at Amato's in Leichhardt is a sweet, spicy white. We eye off a spatlese lexia, a sweetish riesling and end up with a gewurztraminer and good-luck wishes from our temporary wine consultant (and, if you are reading this: you were right).

The entrees read like a scintillating collection of short stories and we want them all but settle for five. That may sound greedy but the dishes, fortunately, turn out to be appetiser-sized, small and, well, appetite-whetting. Frankly, I am surprised they all fit onto our tiny table.

First off, because it's next to my elbow, is palak patta chaat, a pile of spinach leaves fried in lentil batter and doused in yoghurt that tastes faintly minted, and served with three sauces: a divine date one, tangy tamarind for [balance](#) and chilli. There are meant to be chickpeas and potato, too, but I completely miss them because there is crisp, nutty lentil batter and smooth, wet yoghurt with a tingle of chilli on one part of my tongue, a sweet hit of date on another - a starburst of sensations going off in my mouth.

The king prawns til tinka are the epitome of [fine](#) spicing, carrying their mantle of white sesame seeds, fennel, cumin and cracked pepper like an embroidered gown. Then there is the crab chilli putt, which is a bit of a conundrum. I can feel the fresh heat of mustard, ginger and chilli AND taste the sweet crab meat at the same time. The chilli doesn't overheat my mouth and overwhelm the crab at all.

Kadak seekh kebab is minced lamb stuffed with cheese and chillies, roasted in the tandoor with fresh green peppercorns, mint and poppy seeds. The rolls of meat look and taste like a gourmet sausage with the mouth-filling graininess of Lebanese kibbe. The masala dosa is not as crisp as I'd expected; still, the spiced potato and onion filling is delicate and light.

Honestly, I could stop here but we are already committed to the mains, which read like a library of old favourites with a few new titles up the front. The konkon seafood masala has everything promised by the menu: squid, prawns, fried fish (I'm not quick enough and miss out on the scallops) in a tomatoey coconutty sauce spiked with coriander and cumin. Again, the flavour of each sea creature is clear even while draped in a warm spicy coating. From the specials we pluck the beef ambotik, which is hot, hot. A tomato onion cumin stew that almost borders on vegemite, its power leaves me unmoved. The Kashmiri pilau, laced with fruit and nuts, is a good counterpoint to both dishes.

About nine o'clock, people start to leave. A quartet of older folk leans on sticks and chats on the footpath, winding scarves around necks. Then the rugby crowd materialises, mobiles to ears as they direct fellow fans to the restaurant. An Indian family walks through the door, and three children scampers up the stairs.

We direct our attention and spoons to a pistachio kulfi and a double-ka-meetha - described as a bread and butter pudding but actually bread poached first in rosewater syrup, then in milk. It is spongy and pink and the milk has a nicely runny custard consistency. It's served with rose petal ice-cream and silver leaf and sounds more interesting than it tastes. Oh, but the kulfi is lovely. Batons of nutty, creamy yoghurt, frozen stiff and studded with fresh green kernels, bursting with freshness and totally refreshing.

We feel as comfortable as the two blokes who grandly wipe their mouths on their napkins and call over the owner and his cashier. They all pat each other on the back in a kind of post-prandial scrum and the two dinner companions disappear into the night. All the atmosphere of a local suburban Indian diner but not a samosa in sight.

OUT OF TEN

#### **Food 8**

A dosa above the usual fare with old favourites and different dishes.

#### **Service 8**

**Fine** - but somebody should have warned us about ordering too much.

#### **Atmosphere 8**

Ebullient, like being in the stands with the winning fans.

#### **Value 8**

\$87 for two, excluding drinks - but somebody should have warned us about ordering too much.