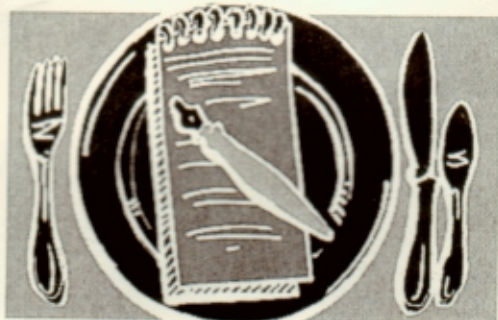


# RESTAURANTS



MARK VAN MANEN/VANCOUVER SUN

**Owner Bhupinder Mroke serves Indian cuisine at Palki in North Vancouver.**

## PALKI

★★★½

There's no one-sauce-fits-all and flavours don't careen through your mouth like a Mack truck. It's a gem on the North Shore, where Indian food is scarce. Buffet lunch Monday to Friday; dinner seven days a week. 116 East 15th St., North Vancouver, 986-7555

I'm not proud of my indiscretion, but some tableside conversations are just too good to pass up. Tuning into an all-female gab-klatsch at Palki, I learn how it's possible for an adoptive mom to breastfeed an infant with the help of hormones. "No, you don't have to have been pregnant," she clarifies.

That spirited exchange on families and children and giving birth, I concluded, had everything to do with the food they were eating. This is good Indian food. The sauces, a skilful blend of herbs and spices, are as earthy, evocative and deeply mysterious as life itself.

Watching the scene makes me realize that restaurants are more than places to eat — they go deeper than what's offered on menus. At Palki, you won't find suspiciously similar sauces cloaking a host of unidentifiable meats and vegetables. The food may not be as refined as Vij's, the uber-Indian restaurant, but Shakti Chand, who heads the kitchen, offers a variety of full-bodied but gentle dishes.

Something seems familiar about this place and it turns out owner Bhupinder Mroke was the original owner of Dawat in East Vancouver. I reviewed it seven years ago, saying it left most other Indian restaurants in the dust. At the time — before Vikram Vij (of Vij's), before Sam Lalji (of Sami's on West

**At Palki, the spices used by chef Shakti Chand taste freshly ground, while the menu gives vegetarians the respect they deserve**

Broadway and Cambie streets) — it did just that.

Most of the main dishes at Palki hover between \$9 and \$10. Starters are \$3.25 to \$7. During the week, the \$7.95 lunch buffet, featuring about a dozen items, would be a prelude to a siesta.

Start with the potato naan, as soft as a baby blankie. Cut off a piece and potatoes spill out. It's lovely. As for the main dishes, Chand's spices taste freshly roasted and ground. The bases for his sauces, depending on the dish, are coconut milk, yogurt, milk, wine or cooked vegetables.

The menu leans toward Northern Indian cuisine with its pulaos (pilaf), nuts and dried fruit, and with the meats and breads slap-cooked on the sides of a sizzling-hot tandoor.

Vegetarians get the respect they deserve in the form of eight meatless dishes, such as Punjabi-style garbanzo beans with onions, ginger and spices; *baigan bhartha*, a pureed roasted eggplant with the consistency of tapioca pudding; and *navrattan korma*, which features veggies in a tomato-and-cream sauce, speckled with nuts and raisins. The vegetable pulao was a drift of basmati saffron rice, tossed with vegetables, raisins, cashews and spices.

The onion bhazia, deepfried in a chickpea batter, arrived looking alarmingly orange. I hoped it was the spicing and dove in, and I couldn't stop at just 10. I also enjoyed the lamb *methi* — tender lamb chunks marinated in fenugreek and yogurt. The prawns in Goan curry could have used life jackets in the sea of sauce, but at least the sauce was tasty.

All the better to take home the leftover sauce and reincarnate it as another dish. Just add peas, potato and carrots, or whatever else is languishing in that vegetable drawer.

*Sun restaurant critic Mia Stainsby conducts her restaurant visits anonymously. Interviews are done afterwards, by phone. Restaurants are rated out of five stars.*