



diningout

BY MICHAEL NAGRANT email diningout@suntimes.com | Follow @michaelnagrant

INDO-CHINESE MASH-UP

Bombay Chopsticks might just turn you on to delectable new world of fiery flavors



The sliced eggplant stuffed with mashed potatoes is a fiery hot affair thanks to pleny of ginger and garlic.



The vegetable Manchow soup is a satisfying dish, boasting a dice of carrots, celery and onions.



The stir-fried black pepper mushroom appetizer is decidedly Sichuan in scope.

General Tso is an imposter. Not the very real legendary Qing dynasty general but rather the popular dish featuring cloying reddish-brown sauce-enrobed, boneless-McNugget-like meat served at every Chinese takeout in America. It did not originate in China but was created by an immigrant Chinese chef in the early 1970s in New York.

Like fortune cookies (which were invented by the Japanese and popularized by the Chinese in America), chop suey and boneless almond chicken, General Tso's was a fusion of Chinese technique and a play to the American penchant for sugar, salt and glistening, gloppy, gravy-like sauces.

Though we're usually pretty good at corrupting the purity of ethnic cuisines, the general precedent for this kind of bastardization of regional Chinese food was actually established in India. Hakka (Han Chinese) immigrants arrived to work the port of Calcutta in West Bengal in the late 18th century and over the next two centuries assimilated typical Indian flavorings such as chili, garlic and ginger and created hybrid dishes like chili paneer and sweet and sour chicken (which is not nuclear orange as is our tradition but more of a brown, soy-based concoction similar to General Tso's).

Last January, the India House restaurant group fired a serious salvo in the war for Indian-Chinese supremacy by opening Bombay Chopsticks in Hoffman Estates.

Admittedly, I was initially a little dubious of the restaurant. Bombay Chopsticks is located in the land of Ikea and Red Lobster. The name of the restaurant sounds like a Disney World samosa and egg roll concession.

Thankfully the name is where the

cheese ends. While most American-Indian and Chinese restaurants feature kitschy bric-a-brac-like Mao posters, paper lanterns or Buddha and Ganesh statues, the India House team has created a sexy modern "Mad Men"-meets-Mughal restaurant palace. Except for a few cove-like entryways that would be at home in the Taj Mahal, and the cricket matches on the flat-screen TVs near the bar, the silver painted walls, the sharp chrome/crystal chandeliers and black leather-tufted banquettes at Bombay Chopsticks are decidedly modern-American-metrosexual bachelor. If you'd been brought here blindfolded, you might think you were in a suburban outpost of Sepia or L20.

Bombay's executive chef, CS Rawat, is running the most fastidious freighter on the planet. His menu is biblically long and seems to defy any chance of consistency based on the volume of dishes on offer alone. There are over a hundred to try, and yet, of the 15 or so I sampled, only two were slightly disappointing.

The Mandarin honey chili chicken's failure was not for dearth of spice or seasoning but more likely because, as a white American, I predictably longed for a little more honey. Peas and paneer with ginger sauce was a little too creamy and might have benefitted from a touch of lifting lemon. Then again, the paneer, unlike the rubbery stuff you find at your average Indian buffet, was a silky fresh cloud of cheese.

With the clay pot lamb, though, there was no wavering. A thick, rich stew brightened by ginger and scallion, it reminded me of a mash-up of American-Cantonese Mongolian beef and Pakistani nihari featuring notes of licorice from Chinese star anise. Just

BOMBAY CHOPSTICKS ★★★

721 W. Golf Rd., Hoffman Estates; (847) 380-5775; bombaychopstickschicago.com

Hours: Lunch: 11:30 a.m.-3 p.m. Monday-Friday; noon-3 p.m. Saturday. Dinner: 5-10 p.m. Monday-Thursday; 5-11 p.m. Friday-Saturday; noon-10 p.m. Sunday.

Prices: Appetizers, \$5-\$11; entrees, \$12-\$25; dessert, \$5-\$47.

Try: Manchow soup, black pepper mushrooms, clay pot lamb

In a bite: A sweet and spicy mash-up of Indian and Chinese flavors, Bombay Chopsticks is a true revelation. The fast, caring service, modern decor and original dishes are truly unique in a world where too often, originality means wrapping things in bacon. The only quibble is that we don't have one of these in the city proper. Kid-friendly.

KEY: ★★★★★ Extraordinary; ★★★ Excellent; ★★ Very Good; ★ Good; Zero stars: Poor

as satisfying was vegetable Manchow soup, a clear, starch-thickened broth (reminiscent of a bowl of egg drop soup) featuring a perfect rainbow confetti dice of carrot, celery and onion.

Moving from the kettle to the wok, a stir-fry of mushrooms tossed in a sweet black pepper sauce, was as earthy, complex and balanced as any dish from Spring World's (in the Chinatown mall) mushroom-focused Yunnan Chinese menu. The heat of the dish, which leaves your cheeks flush

and your lips tingling, is decidedly very Sichuan.

Spice preferences are adjustable, and the tableside selection of spicy relishes, chutneys and pickles allows you to perk things up as your stomach lining allows. One inherently fiery dish I particularly enjoyed was deep-fried sliced eggplant stuffed with mashed potatoes, garlic and green chili. It was as if a crab rangoon had made sweet love to an Indian-spiced ratatouille.

Just as inspiring as the food was the service. Unbidden, our waitress brought over mango lassi for my cranky toddler son and refolded my wife's napkin when she went to the rest room. Dishes were brought to the table faster than you can say "super-size me."

All that spicy food required a cooling liquid, and our Eastern-European waitress turned out to be quite the Indian beer sommelier, easily parsing the differences between a malty Hayward's 5000 and a clean hazy lager-like Taj Mahal.

As a food writer who occasionally eats goat eyeballs, and relishes rare Indonesian curries, I am very Copernican in my outlook on food, often thinking there is little new under the sun. And that still may be true; Indian-Chinese had existed for more than 200 years before I found it. But, over a few last sips of that Taj Mahal, I realized more than any meal in the last few years, my recent visits to Bombay Chopsticks were a Timothy Learyesque flavor trip that truly turned me on and tuned me in to a whole new delectable world.

Michael Nagrant is a local free-lance writer. E-mail the Sun-Times Dining section at diningout@suntimes.com with questions and comments.



The "Clay Pot" lamb stew at Bombay Chopsticks is brightened by ginger and scallions. AL PODGORSKI-SUN-TIMES PHOTOS