

Try something new: A primer on Indian cuisine

Editor's note: This is the first in an occasional series on speciality, ethnic cuisine aimed to arm you with everything you need to know before trying something new.

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If you haven't eaten Indian food before, or you've only tried it a few times, facing the large menu typical of most Indian restaurants can be rather intimidating.

A little guidance might help. Surjit Singh Mattu, president of Amar India restaurant, has served thousands of meals to Dayton residents since opening his business in Centerville nearly 20 years ago. He enjoys introducing Ohioans to the cuisine and even hosts educational lunches for local schoolchildren.

His first tip? Bring a friend or two or three. Indian food is usually brought to the table in small casserole dishes, for guests to scoop out onto individual dinner plates. You and your friends can all order different dishes and then try them all out to see which you like best.

Also, many people worry that Indian food will be too spicy. Not necessarily. Most restaurants will let you request the level of spiciness for the dishes you order. At Amar India, they follow a 1-5 spice scale, ranging from mild to hot. Not afraid of a bit of heat in your dinner? The truly adventurous have been known to order their entrees at a 10 or 12 on the spice scale.

We asked Mattu for his best

food suggestions for newcomers picking out a meal. He recommended some of his most popular items. You could start with these plates and plan to branch out later as your own favorites emerge.

Appetizers

Vegetable samosas: Mattu said these are a great introduction to your meal. Samosas are crisp, fried pastries filled with potatoes and peas. If you prefer meat, order keema samosas, which come with minced beef instead of potato.

Vegetable pakora: These are one of the most popular items on the buffet at Amar India. They are lightly fried vegetable fritters with mildly spiced onions, potatoes and spinach.

Chicken tikka: This appetizer is chicken cubes marinated in yogurt and mild spices, baked in a clay oven, and served on a sizzling plate.

Breads

Roti: A basic option — traditionally baked whole wheat bread — is a good choice if you'd like something simple and healthy.

Garlic naan: If you want to try a bit more flavor, garlic naan is unleavened bread that works great either as an appetizer or to accompany a meal. (It's good for scooping up rice and sauces.) Naan comes in a number of flavors, including onion and chicken, but garlic tends to be the most popular.

Vegetarian entrees

Saag paneer: "This is the No. 1 selling item in our restaurant," Mattu said. "People go crazy about spinach." If you see the word 'saag' on a menu, you know that item contains spinach. In this case, the dish consists of homemade cheese

cooked in spinach and light cream.

Shahi paneer: Another popular vegetarian dish, this meal is homemade cheese cooked in a tomato sauce with cream, nuts, raisins and spices.

Aloo choley: This is chickpeas and potatoes. At Amar India, they prepare it in the North Indian style.

Nonvegetarian entrees

Chicken tandoori: The term 'tandoori' refers to the clay oven these dishes are baked in. Chicken tandoori is chicken marinated in yogurt and mild spices and baked in the clay oven.

Chicken tikka masala: One of the most popular chicken dishes, this meal has lightly marinated chicken cooked in a savory tomato sauce with onions and butter.

Chicken saag: The meat-eaters answer to saag paneer, this is chicken cooked with spinach and light cream.

Desserts

Kulfi: If you still have room after trying out so many dishes, finish your meal off with kulfi, an Indian-style pistachio ice cream topped with rose water. What makes it Indian? "It's a different texture, more solid. We don't put whipped cream in. We cook the milk with pistachios and almonds before freezing it," Mattu said.

House specialties

Don't forget to ask if your restaurant has any menu items special to them. At Amar India, they serve a Mattu Special as an appetizer. "It's my own creation," Mattu said. "It's chopped chicken with onions in a pastry with herbs."

Life

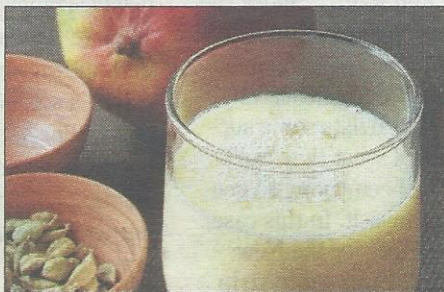


Chicken tandoori

Beverages

Mango lassi: Lassi is a traditional Indian yogurt drink. This version has mango blended with yogurt, with just a bit of rosewater added. If you are eating a spicier dish, then sips of lassi can really help to cool your tongue.

Chai: Mattu promises that if you order chai (a spiced but sweet milky tea) at an Indian restaurant, it'll be better than the stuff they serve up at coffee chains.



Mango Lassi



Chai