

Edmonton Journal, March 2, 2011 – Review by Alan Kellogg

Family-run Narayanni's is in a league of its own

South Asian restaurant stands out from the pack with light, flavourful, satisfying food

By Alan Kellogg, edmontonjournal.com March 2, 2011



Daya Naidoo, at left, his daughter Youmashni Naidoo, centre, and Selva Naidoo, at right, in their family run restaurant, Narayanni's, at 10131 81 Avenue in Edmonton.

Photograph by: Chris Schwarz, edmontonjournal.com

EDMONTON — Among the bounty of blessings bestowed by immigrants to this place is the plethora of South Asian restaurants that have transformed and enlightened Edmonton dining.

It has become as competitive a culinary realm as Cantonese cafés once used to be in these parts. Indian options are available all over the capital region, ranging from the humblest, fluorescent-tube-lit dives to nothing short of fine dining in sumptuous settings. Sometimes, for those of us who scribble and tap about eating out, it seems the only new promising, locally owned places are hopeful purveyors of naan, curry and saag paneer. In other words, standing out from the pack has become a challenge — big time.

Well. Let it be shouted from the rooftops of Old Strathcona that Narayanni's is in a league of its own, guaranteed to startle and delight the most jaded, turmeric-stained veterans of the Indian buffet lines.

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Situated on an evolving light-industrial street in the former 1920s Arndt's Machine Shop — lately declared a historic site — Narayanni's offers several surprises, the first of which is its interior. Courtesy of a dramatic, dropped ceiling, the effect is anything but barn-like and barrel-vaulted.

Gorgeous terracotta floors (check out the washrooms), tasteful lighting, ochre-coloured walls, a bank of black booths, dark wainscoting, understated Indian objets and a stone fireplace speak of elegant cosiness. Unlike so many chain restaurants designed from afar, here is a place actually imagined and created for our climate by the very owners who work in it daily.

You wouldn't think that an establishment of this elevated pedigree would be an all-buffet operation for dinner as well as lunch, but then, Narayanni's has its own formidable wrinkle on that one, too. Think not of the standard steam tray ritual but of the daily select fare and presentation of fresh ingredients you might find at a tony private club or the most luxurious cruise ship — without the porky, hyperactive couple from Buffalo sitting across from you, of course.

From the first taste of the appetizers, you'll notice the difference. Everything here, from the samosas to the bhajias, the pappadums to the pakoras is lighter, more flavourful, less sinful, more satisfying. Don't miss the fabulous homemade mango chutney, light-years refined from the usual sugary glop, along with an uptown, addictive lemon pickle.

On a frigid evening, a bowl of turkey chili soup was a warming treat, completed with a delicious dollop of chef Selva Naidoo's thick, rich raita. Normally one passes on the western-style salad items regularly offered at South Asian outlets. But to miss the perfect Greek salad — which cleaned the clock of many a Hellenic bistro in town — would have been a waste.

On the principal plate menu that night — things change daily based on fresh market availability — were stainless treasure chests of braised mushrooms, cabbage, squash, green beans, dal, chicken and lamb curries along with masala chicken. Full marks all around, with not a weak entry among the lot. Our only complaint was the lack of a fish or shellfish option.

The sweet, complex, irresistible squash dish stands as an example of the quality and attention to detail found on the rest of the line. Caramelized onion, garlic, roasted cumin, mustard seed, turmeric, homemade masala, cilantro and olive oil meet organic squash in a heavenly marriage begging for a boffo Bollywood dance number.

It's all, as front of house manager Youmashni Naidoo tells it, about her family's determination to set a new Edmonton standard by using local and organic products whenever possible and home-roasting quality spices. Everything is made from scratch. The vegetarian dishes are strictly vegan, right down to the incredible paratha made with non-hydrogenated margarine instead of butter or ghee. The lamb in the curry and samosas comes from a nearby ranch. No creams. No heavy sauces. Youmashni's mother Selva does all the cooking. Father Daya insists only primo *Intelligentsia arabica* coffee is used in the impressive lattes and espressos.

Sister Shabithra helps out on weekends. They are kindly, welcoming professionals.

The Naidoo family moved here from Durban, South Africa, in 1982, first opening a convenience store and then Block 1912 on Whyte Avenue. Youmashni says it's also the South African influence that makes Narayanni different, reflecting an Indo-African fusion that incorporates many elements not found on the Indian subcontinent. The meals follow Ayurvedic dietary principles, which include balancing six tastes — sweet, sour, salty, bitter, pungent and astringent — designed to enhance digestion.

Speaking of such, the luscious chocolate mousse served to your table and a terrific cuppa joe will set you satisfied — pleasantly so, not bloated — on your way into the night.

Be reminded that true quality always carries a fair price, and there will be those who will balk at the tariffs here, which are a bit higher than the norm. In fact, it's worth every penny and more, actually representing a bargain of sorts when compared with other fine-dining establishments.

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Narayanni is the Hindu goddess of abundance, not to mention the name of Shabithra's daughter. The moniker couldn't be more apt for this welcome and unique newcomer, given the beguiling balance of close family and superlative food.

For another perspective on Narayanni's, check out this blog post on Chris Falconer's [Eating is the Hard Part](#), and this one on Twyla Campbell's [It's a Weird, Wild and Wonderful Life](#)

Narayanni's

10131 81st Ave.

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