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Bring Two Stomachs To Narayanni's

Family-run Narayanni's is unlike any Indian restaurant you've ever tried before.
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I know what you're thinking. You're thinking, Edmonton needs another Indian buffet like it needs another giant aluminum baseball bat. Well guess what? Turns out you're wrong.

Narayanni's is a — if not “the” — new arrival on Edmonton's Indian food scene, but their take on subcontinental cuisine (by way of South Africa) with its emphasis on organic and locally sourced ingredients and de-emphasis on creamy and/or buttery sauces sets them apart from the chafing dishes full of butter chicken and saag paneer beckoning from every curry-scented nook in the city.

To be clear, Narayanni's doesn't give you the option of buffet, it IS a buffet.

The menu is for your choice of beverages. This is good news in that the food in those chafing dishes doesn't languish while everyone orders a la carte. And the choice is extensive enough that vegans, vegetarians and omnivores will emerge equally well-fed.

In addition to the appetizer table, a tureen of legume soup and a variety of vegetable and grain salads, there were no less than 14 different items to sample, four of which were of the meat variety. Our most recent visit coincided with special arrangements for a large party of vegans, and the spread left nothing for anyone to complain about.

The room is large, open and attractive, painted a warm saffron and tastefully adorned with Indian art and ornamentation, with the buffet tables ringing a big, central coffee bar.

If there's a downside to this arrangement, it's that the high ceiling and tile floors can turn a crowded dining room into a clamorous echo chamber. Try for one of the restaurant's spacious booths to keep the din out of your dinner.

You won't be there long before you get a sense of the pride and pleasure the cheerful Narayanni family takes in serving quality food. Your server prepares you for the experience with a little preamble about the quality ingredients and a glimpse of some of the kitchen secrets, then checks back often to see how you're enjoying it. A charming touch from the first visit was that the dessert table was laid with apples from grandpa's tree.

Having been to the buffet once before, co-diner and I knew to go easy on the appetizers.

The pakoras, potato samosas and vada (crumbly, falafel-esque fritters) are crunchy and tasty, especially when slathered with mango or cilantro chutney, but you have to be strategic if you want to try everything on offer.

Next, a small sample of the hearty legume soup, the couscous bejeweled with lots of diced peppers and currants, and the Indian wedding salad, an exotic coleslaw variant with a creeping cayenne burn.

In point of fact, people with a low tolerance for cayenne and crushed chilies might find the Narayanni buffet a bit of a challenge to enjoy. While the dishes present a delicious balance of fragrant, savoury and fiery spices, the cumulative effect might be a bit much for the tender palate.

With the preliminaries out of the way and a plate of fresh, hot roti on the table, we launched into the entrees. I piled a mix of white and brown basmati rice in the middle of my plate and began to arrange the variety of colourful preparations around the mound, using the soupy lentil dal as gravy on the rice.

Narayanni's vegetable dishes are more like vegetable sides, since each vegetable features prominently rather than swimming together in a heavy sauce.

On the night in question, we enjoyed tender-crisp green beans, sweet and spicy squash (my co-diners fave from a previous visit), crunchy cabbage with whole spices, sautéed eggplant and something I'd never heard of, much less tried before, braised green bananas. Our server explained that the bananas they use are more like plantains and so under-ripe that they're hard to chop. The secret is long simmering that transforms the bitter, waxy fruit into something supple and creamy, with a tantalizing hint of banana fragrance.

On the meat end of the buffet table, there was one each of chicken and lamb curry. Having sampled and savoured them on the previous trip, I reserved what room I had left in my stomach for the lamb kabob — ground lamb meatballs grilled and simmered with mushrooms and onions — and juicy chicken thighs seasoned with a dry marsala rub, which I found far preferable to the usual overdone tandoori chicken found on most buffet tables.

Because of the vegan majority on hand, the cinnamon rice pudding was made with soy milk, but was no less satisfying for it.

We thought we'd exhausted our stomach capacity at that point, but every customer is enjoined to top off their meal with a sumptuously rich ramekin of chocolate mousse and whipped cream, so don't try to leave without claiming yours.

So if you're in the mood for Indian but different — and if you have the ability to borrow a second stomach and bring it along — there's no question that Narayanni's should be high up on your dining-out to-do list.

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