

November 2011

 VIETNAM
ECONOMIC TIMES

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THE GUIDE

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Warmly Welcomed

■ DAVIDE GREENE

Namaste is Indian for a welcome greeting, which is apt for that's how you're greeted when you arrive in the latest addition to Hanoi's busy Indian restaurant scene.

Namaste is run by Mr. Gopi, who Hanoi stalwarts will know from earlier established Indian incarnations such as Dakshin (sadly, no longer with us) and Khazaana (still going strong). After a brief sojourn in Canada, Gopi and his wife just couldn't keep away from Hanoi.

Housed in the premises of the former R&R Bar, you enter into the aptly named welcome room, behind which is the festival room (with a bar). Upstairs there are another two dining rooms plus a Function Room at the back. All told it can seat 100 diners at a time (and since opening in July this year it has already had some nights in excess of that, according to proud owner Gopi).

But even if you can seat 100 guests, how can you feed them all? With three Northern Indian chefs and one specializing in Southern Indian dishes, Namaste has that covered, and the food keeps flowing out of the kitchens, as do



the wonderful aromas of home cooked Indian cuisine.

Much as I love Indian food, I'm not a connoisseur, nor even a regular enough to know exactly what to order, so I was very happy when Gopi, ever at hand, kindly offered to select some dishes for us. I was doubly glad when I opened up the menu to find no fewer than 218 dishes – from soups and starters, through kebabs and vegetarian dishes, to *thali* (set meals) and desserts.

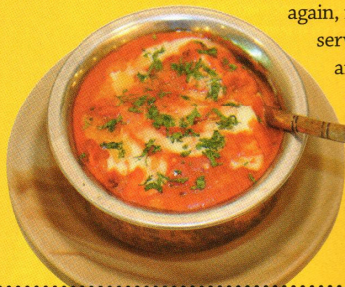
Having established our likes (spicy) and dislikes (none) Gopi disappeared to the kitchen and within a few minutes, his staff returned with the perfect array of starters.

First up, from the north, Prawn Malai Tikka (VND115,000) – fresh pieces of prawns seasoned with a light cashew paste, fresh cream and aroma of spices grilled in a tandoor oven and served on a fajitas style hot platter.

These simply melted in the mouth. Also from the north were the Bhindi Rajasthani (VND55,000) –fried okra served with a yoghurt dip. Crispy and crunchy, but not at all oily, I felt these would make the perfect accompaniment to an afternoon of beers watching sports.

Staying with the starters but moving south, despite its terrible name, Chicken 65 (VND90,000) – south Indian style boneless chicken (8 pieces) rubbed in garlic and spices and deep fried –was crispy and melted in the mouth without any hint of greasiness or oiliness. Finally, Medu Vadi (VND50,000) – a doughnut shaped lentil savoury

with peppercorns and deep fried (though again, not at all greasy, if a little heavy) served with sambar and a coconut and tomato & onion chutneys – which was lovely to dunk your doughnut into and very reminiscent of Dakshin's former south Indian vegetarian fare.



On to mains, and Gopi offered us a mix of red meat, white meat and vegetable dishes.

For the red meat, Mutton Tawa Massala (VND 130,000) – boneless mutton cubes cooked

with an assortment of selected spices and served sizzling (fajitas style). I'm not normally a mutton man but the meat tasted wonderfully fresh and extremely tender. For the white meat, Chicken Balti (VND 95, 000) – not the British style one but a much more authentic spicy chicken kadhai dish served in a traditional Indian balti. As a Brit, of course I was ecstatic with this.

The vegetable dish was a very agreeable Palak Paneer (VND 75,000) – a spinach gravy with home-made cottage cheese. These were accompanied by nans (approx. VND 30,000), plus basmati rice cooked with green peas and flavoured lightly with cumin (VND 55,000).

We were already fairly stuffed but I'm a sucker for gulab jamun(VND 55,000) - India's equivalent of sticky toffee pudding and perfect for a cool autumn evening. We also tried some kulfi (VND 60,000) – Indian ice cream flavoured with mango and saffron (rather than the New Zealand ice cream which is also available).

All this was washed down with mango lassies and beer, although there was an extensive range of wines available too.

By now we were well and truly stuffed and couldn't finish everything, but without hesitation the staff offered to pack up the remnants of our meal to take home. Talking of taking home, Namaste offers its full menu for delivery (all 218 dishes), free of charge to a wide area across Hanoi.

All in all, fantastic authentic food in a very central location from a restaurant team with a great pedigree in Hanoi. Namaste! ☺

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