

Swagat Indian Cuisine

A Warm Welcome!

By Sunil Malapati

Something wonderful happened this week as many in the Tri-States who were bemoaning the lack of an Indian restaurant celebrated the arrival of Swagat, right in the middle of the city. The joy seemed to extend in both directions. The team at Swagat seemed as pleased to serve as the customers who flocked to the place the opening week. We were there on opening night, and the palpable excitement was contagious; all week, I kept hearing from many of my friends both about the quality of food and the experience. Seems appropriate for a place called “Swagat,” which means “welcome” in Sanskrit.

“Swagat” is in the light, airy building on Locust Street, kitty corner from the library, a two-block area that seems bustling with great food places. There is seating both on the ground floor and upstairs with some outdoor seating for summer. The place feels clean and crisp with white table linen and black plates, an upscale feel the food more than satisfied. The service found a way to be polite and attentive without being obsequious; they were knowledgeable as well. They could guide us through gluten-free options, and as I later learned from friends, could steer people between vegan and vegetarian options. Indian food is very vegetarian friendly with a large section of the menu devoted to vegetables; but most foods incorporate cream and ghee (clarified butter), and my vegan friend appreciated their awareness.

The menu at Swagat is quite expansive, showcasing global influences. The predominant cuisine is Punjabi (North India, bordering Pakistan) with well-known dishes like butter chicken and saag paneer. There are regional dishes like Chicken Kolapuri (Western India, closer to Mumbai), Chicken 65 (South India, from Chennai) that spread across India. The Western influence is felt in vindaloo (Portuguese, use of vinegar) and tikka masala (Balti cuisine from Birmingham,



UK). Chinese techniques and ingredients are showcased in quite a few dishes, mostly appetizers. The menu is quite ambitious; in lesser hands, there is a danger of flavors blending between dishes leading to a sameness in all sauces. Fortunately, the chef(s) here know what they are doing!

The global influence is most keenly felt in the appetizers. We ordered Tandoori Chicken, Lamb Seekh Kabab, and Chilly Gobhi. The Tandoor oven uses high heat and reflective surfaces and is great for breads and meats that are cooked quickly. Chicken here is marinated in yogurt, ginger, and garlic, all of which tenderize the meat so that the outside is crisp and the inside tender and juicy. The oven most likely came with the Mughals from Central Asia, but the chicken dish is all Punjabi. The Lamb Seekh Kabab shows Persian influence; the freshness of the sausage could be discerned by hints of floral coriander seeds. Both the grilled dishes were accompanied by greens and a yogurt-onion salad that was not quite a raita, more like a coleslaw with yogurt, something unique and unexpected I found delightful.

As great as the grilled dishes were, the unanimous favorite within our group was Chilly Gobhi. The Chinese technique of coating a food with starch, deep-frying and then coating with a sauce is used to spectacular effect here. The chilli sauce is similar to the soy-based sauce used in a similar dish called Gobhi Manchurian—the salty, sweet, and tangy coating of the crispy cauliflower is further enhanced by onions and bell peppers. Highly recommended.

Before moving on to the entrees and curries, I have to extol the Lamb Dum Biryani, one of the best lamb dishes I have ever had. As someone who has conducted

biryani classes, I know how hard it is get the balance right. The lamb is fork-tender while the spicy rice around it is breathtakingly complex without stealing focus from the meat. The accompanying yogurt sauce cools you down just enough to start digging into the biryani again.

As a group, we ordered four different curries with four different breads to get a pretty wide range of tastes. Each curry comes with basmati rice on the side, so bread is not essential though I would recommend trying those out. Naans are typically fermented (leavened) breads cooked under high heat in the tandoor ovens and have the characteristic black spots. Swagat offers a variety of naans with butter, garlic, and cheese used as toppings. The Garlic & Cheese Naan almost feels like a pizza base for all the curries! The Spice Masala Naan does not go easy on the spice—this is a good time to point out that Swagat means serious business when it comes to spice level. Hot means HOT, so make sure to indicate your spice level accordingly.

Indian restaurant menus typically list the same sauce with different meats as different dishes (unlike Chinese or Thai menus), and the menu typically feels longer as a result. While that is true here of some curries like Korma or Vindaloo, I was pleased to note that some dishes are very specific to the meat or vegetable they use. Including the opening night dinner and takeout, I have tasted six different curries, and I am pleased to report that they all feel distinct and appropriate to the meat or vegetable used.

Goat is one the world's most common meats, yet quite rare in US; none of my dinner companions had tasted goat before. Bhuna Ghee Goat is a traditional braised meat dish with goat pieces sauteed in

BRAZEN
OPEN KITCHEN | BAR

Now Open Mondays

Dinner: Mon-Sat, 4:30-9PM
Reservations Recommended
563.587.8899
www.BrazenOpenKitchen.com

Schmid Innovation Center, 955 Washington St., Suite 101



Ghee, the nutty clarified butter so beloved by Indians. The rich onion and tomato gravy balances the slight gaminess of goat; the meat served with bones was succulent. Chicken Malabar is not on the paper menu, but is on the online takeout menu and is definitely recommended. The Malabar coast (southwest India) is famed for its spices and this dish uses it beautifully with coconut as the moderating base. Shrimp masala has jumbo shrimp floating in a rich tomato sauce that showcases the best of Balti cuisine. Immigrants in Birmingham, UK experimented with canned tomatoes instead of fresh tomatoes used in Indian cuisine and arrived at a tikka masala sauce that was quickly adopted by Indian restaurants across the globe. Swagat's version with the shrimp is divine.

Indian cuisine is vegetable based and it should not be surprising to see an extensive list of vegetarian dishes. Paneer is Indian cheese—think of compressed cottage cheese with the texture of hard tofu and is the basis of several dishes. “Shaam Savera” (literally dusk/dawn) is a relatively new dish developed by celebrity chef Sanjeev Kapoor and find a place on Swagat's menu. Crumbled paneer is wrapped in wilted spinach and served in a creamy tomato-onion sauce that does not use cream and is quite distinct from the other tomato sauces. The tanginess of the tomato is more prominent and balances the richness of paneer and the vegetal spinach. Shahi Paneer Korma comes with a rich cardamom forward sauce; “Shahi” means royal, and it is an elevated version of korma. Korma typically involves a nut-based sauce (often cashews), and the use of cardamom, an expensive spice, makes the dish feel even more luxurious. “Baingan Bharta” is a classic Punjabi dish that is made by slow-roasting eggplant, pureeing it, and cooking with an onion-tomato base. I often judge an Indian restaurant based on their version of this classic, and Swagat passed my test with flying colors.

Readers of my column know how I like to understand the people behind the food, an opportunity I was unable to have with the owners being extra busy with the opening weekend. My few interactions with Mr. Resham Singh as we tried to coordinate an interview showed someone overwhelmed by the response. In this case, the food and the experience speak for themselves. You can feel the love and care that went into designing the menu and the space, and it shows up in every bite. There is an expansiveness and generosity of spirit that bodes well for their success in Dubuque. We are glad to welcome Swagat to our town. ■

Swagat Indian Cuisine

📍 1108 LOCUST ST, DUBUQUE, IA
 ☎ 563-552-0027
 🌐 SWAGATMADISON.COM
 🕒 WED-MON: 10 AM-230 PM & 4-9:30 PM; TUE: CLOSED

SUNIL MALAPATI

SUNIL IS NERDY ABOUT ALL THINGS FOOD, SCIENCE, FOOD SCIENCE AND THEATRE. HE WILL GLADLY ANSWER YOUR QUESTIONS (AS WELL AS BORE YOU WITH FOOD LORE) IF YOU EMAIL HIM AT DINING@DUBUQUE365.COM.



BUT WAIT... THERE'S MORE!
 VIEW OUR FULL DINING ARCHIVE
DUBUQUE365.COM/DINING



Sew Cute Embroidery

Tuesday, Feb. 18, at 4 p.m.

For ages 12 to 17. Registration is required.

No matter if you're new to embroidery or have some experience, join us to start an easy sewing project and go home with your own embroidery kit.

Registration required. Sign up at carnegiestout.org/events or call 563-589-4225, ext. 2228.

Sun SHINE Squad

Tuesday, Feb. 25, from 4 to 5:30 p.m.

For ages 10 to 18. Registration is required.

SHINE (Support Humans in Need of Encouragement) like the sun and make a difference at the library and in the community through art! Participants give feedback and work on various art-centric projects for the community.

Participating in the Sun SHINE Squad is also a great way to earn volunteer hours. The Squad meets at the library on the last Tuesday of each month.

Registration required. Sign up at carnegiestout.org/events or call 563-589-4225, ext. 2248.



360 W. 11th Street | carnegiestout.org