

MUST TRY

Fish tikka (\$12)

The cubes of fish are slightly charred at the edges but smooth and moist inside.



Treats without heat

Indian restaurant Zaffron Kitchen tones down the spice levels in their dishes



Eats
Wong Ah Yoke

While I enjoy Indian food very much, many of my Chinese friends do not. They complain of the strong spices such as aniseed and cardamom that are seldom used in the south Chinese cuisine they are familiar with. Then there are the chilli cowards who steer clear of curries or anything that hint of fire.

For them, I would recommend Zaffron Kitchen, a month-old restaurant in East Coast Road that serves North and South Indian dishes. The family-friendly restaurant, which is designed like a Western eatery with its open kitchen and larder shelves complete with a kids' playhouse and popcorn trolley at the back, takes out the fire without losing the flavours.

I prefer the full force of spices myself but I can see the appeal in what they are doing here. Indeed, the restaurant was packed the two times I dined there – with more Chinese and Caucasian family groups than Indian diners.

The kitchen team comprises four chefs from India, two from the North and two from the South. The menu is extensive, with North and South dishes such as tandoori and tikka items all jumbled up together. The cooking from both sides generally passes muster.

While the South Indian paper dosa is

(\$4.50), a giant roll of rice batter pancake, is not as light as some of those available in Little India eateries, the banana prata (\$9) is nicely done. The crispy Indian pancake, which is commonly eaten with curry, is turned into a dessert with the prata replacing the crepe in what is otherwise a Western dessert. It goes well with the chocolate sauce drizzled over it and I like the crispy edges of the pancake.

The breads from the north are good too, especially the garlic naan (\$3). You can smell the fragrant garlic as it arrives at the table.

As for the main dishes, I am impressed with the fish. Both the fish tikka (\$12) and the fish masala (\$7.50) are excellent because of the smooth, moist texture of the fish cubes. And the marinades, even without the chilli fire, are tasty enough to pack a punch. The tandoori chicken (\$12 for half a chicken) is delicious, too, and the meat is moist and tender. I like it more than the chicken tikka (\$10.50), which is drier.

The chicken tikka also comes as part of a tandoori platter (\$38), which includes the fish tikka, seekh mutton kebab and malai tikka – enough for a party of four persons.

If you want to balance it with vegetables, the tandoori mushroom (\$7.50) is something you do not find often in restaurants here. The mushrooms are dusted with spices and grilled.

While good on their own, they are dry and do not go as well with naan.

For that, you need dishes with lots of gravy, such as the aloo gobi masala (\$9), potatoes and cauliflower cooked in a creamy curry. I usually like cauliflower served in Indian restaurants because the vegetable is always cooked till soft without being mushy. The version here meets expectations, with the cauliflower's sweetness enhanced by the delicious curry.



The kadhai jhinga (\$14), shrimps sauteed in an onion-tomato masala, is another tasty dish to go with naan. The tomato gives it a hint of acidity while the onions add sweetness. And while there are not enough chillies, slivers of ginger give the gravy some kick.

For dessert, there is the ubiquitous gulab jamun (\$5.50), which is best described as being authentically sweet. But I suspect it will be just a matter of time before the chefs tone down the sugar level to suit local palates. Those with a less sweet tooth will prefer the moong dal halwa (\$8), made with boiled-down lentils, milk, butter and sugar. Served warm, and slightly savoury because of the butter, it is delicious with the accompanying vanilla ice cream.

ahyoke@sph.com.sg

LifeStyle paid for its meals at the eatery reviewed here.



If you cannot handle spicy food, try the dum chicken bryani (far left) at Zaffron Kitchen. The restaurant's tandoori platter (left) is enough for four people to share.

PHOTOS: ZAFFRON KITCHEN



ZAFFRON KITCHEN

135 East Coast Road, tel: 6440-6786

Open: 11.30am to 10.30pm (Tuesdays to Sundays). Closed on Mondays

Food: ★★★★★

Service: ★★★★★

Ambience: ★★★★★

Price: Budget from \$30 a person

Hot steamed treasures



Cheap & Good
Thng Lay Teen

Taking a short cut through Prime Court, a coffee shop in Toa Payoh Lorong 7, to get to the hawkers centre in front of it, I was surprised to see trays and trays of freshly made bao stacked neatly on a table.

I could not recall what stall had been operating there barely three months before, but it was certainly not this one. I



PHOTO: TERENCE LIM FOR THE STRAITS TIMES

YUAN JI HANDMADE TIM SUM

Block 18 Toa Payoh Lorong 7 Prime Court

Open: 7am to 9pm daily

Rating: ★★★★★

The steamed lotus leaf rice (left) is packed with plenty of ingredients.

wasted no time checking out Yuan Ji Handmade Tim Sum.

The first thing I normally try at a bao shop is the big bao (\$1.20). If a stall does

this staple well, the other offerings are usually not too far off the mark. The skin of the handmade bao was slightly thick and uneven, but it was soft and tasted just a tad

sweet, the way I like it.

But it was the strips of lean pork filling that clinched it for me. Rather than one lump of minced meat, which is the case in most bao, the strips made for more bite.

Tucked in between the bits of bang-kwang and onion, which gave the bao a natural sweetness, was a quarter of a hard-boiled egg to break the monotony of biting into even more meat.

My hungry companion liked it so much that I had to quickly wrest the remaining half of the bao from him as he had almost finished it. I did not want to order another as we had intended to have breakfast elsewhere and this was a surprise find.

We also enjoyed eating the lor mai kai (steamed glutinous rice, \$1.80) for its well-marinated chicken pieces and black mushroom. It is important to get the rice seasoned just right to complement the whole dish, and this is done well here. The rice

was a little mushy but I did not mind.

I could not resist ordering the steamed lotus leaf rice (\$3), which I have a weakness for. So many ingredients were tightly packed inside the leaf – steamed rice with haebi (dried shrimp), mushroom, salted egg yolk, char siew, chicken and chestnut – it was like a little treasure trove.

I also tried the fan choy (\$1.80). While it was quite tasty, the rice could do with a little more of the char siew gravy. But owner Neo Cheew Guan, 48, explained that since the rice has to be steamed constantly to keep it warm, too much gravy would make the grains far too sticky.

By then, I had abandoned the notion of eating elsewhere and proceeded to get a tau sar bao (50 cents) and lian yong (lotus seed paste) bao (50 cents). Both pastes were smooth and not too sweet.

The kou rou bao (\$1), with its big piece of belly pork complete with fat, was not bad too. In the end, it turned out to be an enjoyable breakfast.

賞味の秋

Autumn in PUTIEN

With authentic, home-style cuisine from Putian, a coastal town of Fujian Province, PUTIEN welcomes autumn with specialty dishes that emphasize on the natural goodness of the autumn