

As Modi visits Israel, a new Indian eatery opens in Tel Aviv: Café Bollywood

Eran Laor

Given the far-from-meagre affection for Indian cuisine in Israel – shaped by generations who traveled there and returned with memories and a longing to go back – most Indian restaurants here, and especially in Tel Aviv, tend to earn a failing grade. They're not authentic enough, not cheap enough, not consistent enough, and often not tasty enough. It would be one thing if they fell short in just one of these areas while compensating in others. Instead, they often disappoint on several fronts at once, forcing devoted diners into a steady compromise between nostalgia and reality.

And when it comes to street food, the discrepancy only grows. These yearnings have, in recent years, been met with stands and eateries that started out fairly well, but found it hard to maintain quality and interest, as well as prices that would appeal to enthusiasts, only to close

down fairly quickly.

The new eatery Café Bollywood arrives with considerable potential. It could either redeem Tel Aviv's underwhelming Indian street-food scene or join the long list of disappointments. It opened last week on the ground floor of the 4 Florentine complex, in the space briefly occupied by the BBQ restaurant Sikh (Skewer). Transience and pop-up turnover are almost built into the complex's character – sometimes by design, sometimes by circumstance – though the team members behind Café Bollywood say they intend to stay. The restaurant is run by Mumbai-born chef Pooja Moses and her partner Meskin, Hindu and Jewish respectively, who moved to Israel about a decade ago.

Together – he at the counter and she in the kitchen behind him – they offer a menu that leaves three main impressions. First, it is long and includes many dishes. Second, it is exclusively

vegetarian and vegan, with no use of beef, chicken or seafood. And third, it is significantly cheaper, not only compared to other restaurants in this genre but also compared to Tel Aviv street food in general.

The opening, however, did not go smoothly. Last weekend they faced a series of mishaps – a malfunctioning dishwasher, a shortage of disposable tableware to ease this challenge, a veteran cook who could not take the pressure and simply skeddaddled. As a result, service was delayed, some dishes on the menu were absent, and the kitchen eventually announced it was closing and would not be accepting any more orders, in order to release the gridlock.

The inherent advantage of street food – as opposed to a full-service restaurant – is the ability to ignore everything surrounding the food and concentrate almost exclusively on the food itself. In this case, the logistical is-

suues were specific and easily solvable. Still, it seems best to allow for some patience when visiting this restaurant.

Thanks to the extensive menu, there was plenty to order. The food is generally divided into street food – pastries, snacks and various fritters (like samosa, dhokla and dosa for 25 to 42 shekels) – and main dishes based on paneer cheese, vegetables and lentils served with rice or naan (45 to 55 shekels).

Panipuri (35 shekels) are six fried, crispy, hollow dough shells, served here as a sharing starter with a trio of dips – sweetish tamarind, a sour pea mixture and a piquant chutney – facilitating a fun game of stuffing, textures and tastes that seem to clash but in fact complement each other. Pakoda is another well-known snack, and just as enjoyable. It consists of deep fried fritters of finely sliced onion, gram flour and spices, served here over a fresh and powerful cilantro chutney, thick and

grassy and adequately spicy.

One of the more interesting dishes here is called Mumbai sandwich toast (29 shekels), a street staple there that could absolutely work here, too. It's made of toasted white bread slices with that same spicy chutney, a thin layer of spicy tomato mixture, a slice of tomato and red bell pepper and, of course, melted cheese; topped with a mound of crispy gram flower noodles and ketchup on the side. The result is quite charming, though a certain excess of chutney was evident, at the expense of the potato layer.

The pick of the lot was vada pav, a potato dumpling served inside a bun (18 shekels for one, 30 shekels for a pair). The fried dumpling is very tasty, unremittably spicy, crispy on the outside and soft and chewy on the inside. The bun is also good, balancing the bite and allowing for comfortable noshing, while the tamarind and chutney dips deliver a refresh-



A meal at Café Bollywood.

Nadav Yehalom

ing contrast that makes the whole business lighter.

We ordered two main dishes, paneer butter masala (diced cheese in tomato-butter sauce, 55 shekels) and dal makhani (slow-cooked black lentils and red kidney beans in sauce, 49 shekels), with butter-garlic naan and basmati rice with cumin seeds. Regarding value for money, these dishes kept the strong momentum of their

predecessors, but the taste left something to be desired. In contrast to the earlier dishes' bold and interesting flavors, these were somewhat anemic. This was true for both dishes, the naan and even the rice. An absence of seasoning (particularly salt, for some reason) prevented them from excelling in taste as they did in their mouth-watering appearance.

Café Bollywood is a very

welcome addition to the local street food – in style, prices, intent and aspiration – but it is on a course that many before it failed to complete. It will require fine-tuning, a bit of polishing and a little more luck for this Bollywood movie to end differently.

Café Bollywood
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