

India, by Way of England, Arrives on the Strip

An acclaimed restaurant learns the new landscape.

LAS VEGAS — This is the Strip, where glittering replicas crowd together, decontextualized for your pleasure. I rush by the Eiffel Tower, look up at a marble copy of the statue of David and cut through the casino at Aria to Gymkhana for dinner.

The original Gymkhana opened in London in 2013, named for India's elite social clubs, which served the British during colonial rule, then opened to India's high society after independence. The restaurant mined an aesthetic and sold it back to Britain with the gentle subversions of a historical romance.

Gymkhana didn't simplify, modernize or even really adapt a particular style of rich, rip-roaring, pleasure-driven Indian cooking — party-ready tikkas and kebabs, chaats and biryanis. Instead, it recreated it with confidence and finesse (and cocktails!), emphasizing the Indian restaurant's overlooked capacity for luxury.

It was convincing: Gymkhana in London now has two Michelin stars, and the three partners behind JKS Restaurants (the siblings Jyotin, Karam and Sunaina Sethi) run 32 restaurants across the world.

The Vegas Gymkhana faithfully reproduces the dark green entrance in Mayfair and almost all of the menu, though this space draws more overtly from regional Indian artwork and design — glamorous animal paintings, mirrored detailing, lush textiles. The effect of bringing down the ceiling and breaking up the dining room tricked me into thinking the dining room was a bit cozier than it is — I was surprised to learn there are 170 seats.

Srikant Kumar is the chef; he started his career in the kitchens of Oberoi Hotel properties in India and cooked most recently at Kismet Modern Indian in Alexandria, Va. Mr. Kumar's plan had been to import Indian hari mirch, the hot green chiles, but that didn't work out.

Fruity little bird's-eye chiles make a fine replacement when they're fried whole and tucked into the beetroot chops pao, a beet patty sandwich that's practically alive with prismatic tang and heat and delightfully layered with texture — the crisp buttery edge of the toasted bun, the bed of tiny crunchy chickpea boondi, the delicate dusting of hot peanut ghati.

This is a snacky dish, and like much of the food at Gymkhana, it's easy to miss how much work has gone into it. Mr. Kumar's kitchen makes all of the breads, including naan, roti and these dainty, slightly sweet and exceptionally buttery buns, so close to being brioche.

The patties, which include some shredded carrot, are marinated with ginger, chiles and a flickering chaat masala that's made in house, cooked in the oven before they're breaded and fried so the flavors are concentrated, the textures sharp.

Gymkhana is known for a handful of dishes, among them the masala lamb chops. The chops are butchered so the bone is clean, but the meat that remains is chunky, hulking, then cooked in a way that deepens all the pleasures of well-done lamb, smothered first in a chile-stained marinade of yogurt and sizzled just to the point of starting to singe in the charcoal tandoor (the kitchen has two).

In London, the venison for the biryani comes from Scotland. Here, in the Mojave Desert, Mr. Kumar buys it from New Zealand. The dish seems to be at every table, in part for the sheer drama of opening the pastry and catching the steam that escapes, a moment that would seem made for social media if it hadn't been manufactured hundreds of years earlier for showy Mughal



PHOTOGRAPHS BY ROGER KISBY FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES



Top, patrons in the bar and lounge of Gymkhana, which is in the Aria Resort & Casino. Middle row, from left: venison biryani, which arrives under a puffy cap of seed-covered pastry; and Srikant Kumar, the chef. Above, from left: inside the dining room; and the Maharaja Margarita bar cart.

courts.

Inside: Deeply spiced marrow-filled shanks are layered with caramelized onion and airy saffron-stained rice and the effect is steadily kaleidoscopic. (Gymkhana in Las Vegas does serve beef, though not much of it; some spicy ground beef appears in a rather forgettable naan and there's a stir-fried short rib with a delicate ruffle of Malabar paratha.)

Vegas offers a bit more hand-holding than its counterpart in London — you'll find more italics and explanations under dish names, and there is (alas?) no option to add



brains to the goat methi keema, which was, on one of the nights that I ordered it, hurt-your-mouth salty.

A server will most likely ask if you're familiar with Indian food but, regardless of your answer, only issue a vague warning about "the kick to it." I found this both funny and flattening, and it gave me the sense they weren't too familiar with it themselves. In some cases that might be true, but I also think that Gymkhana isn't interested in educating diners so much as entertaining them.

This includes a wealthy, international In-

GYMKHANA ★★

3730 SOUTH LAS VEGAS BOULEVARD, LAS VEGAS (INSIDE ARIA); 702-590-9520; GYMKHANARESTAURANTS.COM

Atmosphere A lush, cozy club tucked inside the chaos of a Las Vegas resort and casino where people are seriously dressed up for dinner.

Service Ranging wildly from detached and disinterested to warm and friendly.

Sound level Clubby Punjabi R&B mixes from the D.J. Amrit Mattoo.

Recommended Beetroot chops pao; aloo chaat; tandoori masala lamb chops; venison biryani; short rib pepper fry; saffron-pistachio ice cream falooda

Drinks Expensive, excellent cocktails and some fun large-format drinks for groups.

Price Appetizers, \$22 to \$34; kebabs and tikkas, \$34 to \$75; vegetable sides, \$15; desserts, \$17

Open Daily, for dinner only.

Reservations Yes

Wheelchair access The restaurant has an accessible entrance and bathrooms, as well as wheelchair seating at the bar.

What the stars mean Ratings range from zero to four stars. Zero is poor, fair or satisfactory. One star, good. Two stars, very good. Three stars, excellent. Four stars, extraordinary.

dian diaspora that comes to party in big raucous groups, and dates, dressed for the high-roller tables in a Bond movie. Reservations, which open 45 days ahead of time, are annoyingly hard to get, and it's a shame you can't walk in for a drink at the bar, which also requires a reservation. Gymkhana is clubby by design, and whether or not that feels fun will depend on your experience of clubs.

Once you're inside, with a drink, with a lamb chop, you might forget that you're in a giant maze of a building. But it can take some time to find your way to the restaurant, especially if you pause at the slot machines, or to let people finish shooting videos on their phones. Don't get distracted — hosts won't hesitate to give away your table if you're 15 minutes late.