

Welcome to the Grand Punjabi Experience

The cooking is beguiling, and the city feels miles away.

RAJ KACHORI, king of snacks, comes to the table at Ambassadors Clubhouse as a grand, taut puff, a balloon in soul, coaxed down to earth. The semolina shell is inflated in hot oil and draped in coolly sweet beetroot yogurt with stripes of chutneys — sour tamarind, chile-blitzed mint — under crunchy kinks of aloo sev.

In India, this is street food, complex and ornate, the mess half the fun. Here, it starts off tidier and more composed, but the principle still holds.

Go ahead, crack into it. Inside, the splendor keeps going: layers of earthiness (potatoes, chickpeas), juiciness (mung bean sprouts), smoke (beets charred from the tandoor), melt (little dal dumplings) and zing (chaat masala with puckery green mango powder), and then the toppings spilling in.

Why settle for just one flavor? In Hindi, this swirl of sour-spicy-salty-sweet — all the feelings! — is called chatpata, a word unmatched in English. It might equally well describe the more-is-more spirit of Ambassadors Clubhouse itself.

The London-based owners, the siblings Jyotin, Karam and Sunaina Sethi, run an empire that includes Sri Lankan hopper shops, Persian kebab houses and aristocratic-chic Indian restaurants. Gymkhana, which slyly co-opts the aesthetics of the dismantled British Raj (and now has outposts in Riyadh and Las Vegas), and the original Ambassadors Clubhouse, opened in 2024, both have addresses in affluent Mayfair.

Contrast the Sethis' first foray into Manhattan, at the foot of a new-construction office building on frantic Broadway at West 31st Street. But the address doesn't matter. Enter the blue doors, with their two-foot-long brass pulls and flankings of plants in giant urns, and the city is gone.

Velveteen carpet muffles footsteps and the pulse of Punjabi hip-hop. Dipped and gelled bulbs cast close-held halos. Tiles are hand-painted, ceilings coffered, leather embossed. Everything gleams: gold, silver, crystal, mirrors, black lacquer, brass tabletops etched with tiny swords. You sense the space expand around you, two floors and 8,000 square feet of prime real estate, yet at the same time you feel cloistered and cosseted, each table a private nook.

In pageantry like this, there is always the risk of ending up with a theme park. The Sethis wisely anchor their world-building in family and memory: Their maternal grandfather was, in fact, an ambassador, posted to Dublin, Nairobi and Amsterdam. As kids, they spent summers at his mansion — the model for the restaurant — in the hill station of Dalhousie, once part of the historic region of Punjab.

Karam Sethi told The Times last year that Polo Bar, in Midtown, was a reference for the kind of immersive ambience they seek to create. So, is the goal affably patrician and ruthlessly exclusive, and by the way there's food, too?

In that case, they've overdelivered. For beneath the sumptuous surfaces and occasional theatrics — a baked Alaska on fire! a monumental chicken molded out of puff pastry, with painstakingly snipped feathers that would put Marie-Antoine Carême to shame! — the cooking is earnest and often disarmingly good.

About that chicken: A large-format platter available only in New York (because everything is bigger in America), it's inspired by a recipe from the Punjabi city of Kotkapura, in which a whole chicken is swaddled in dough so it cooks in its own steam and the juices can't flee. There, the dough is purely functional, discarded before serving; here, it's edible sculpture, complete with spiky crest and a semi-boneless poussin tucked within.

Only two orders are on offer each night. The meat is succulent enough, but the joy, once the bird is carved tableside, is the treasure hunt, digging in to find saffron-soaked almonds and the charm of a perfect boiled egg.

Nothing is truly small-format here, if measured by sheer richness and labor. Squares of sinkingly soft paneer, made of buffalo milk curdled with vinegar and pressed in-house, get a bruise of smoke, via the 18th-century Dhungar technique of setting a hot coal in a saucer inside a pot, dousing it with ghee and clapping down the lid. An Amritsari-style kulcha is repeatedly massaged with ghee, then baked and, while still hot from the tandoor, slaked with freshly churned butter.

The Delhi-born chef, Karan Mittal, is quick to credit his team of halwai, artisanal confectioners who work from midnight past dawn preparing dozens of elements, like the delicate basket for tokri chaat, woven out of taro and fried hard, the better to reduce to crackly ruin. Crackle is a theme: Where diners at the London original eat seekh kebabs off a skewer, here the meat is wrapped tight in a skin-thin shortcrust, for shatter with each bite.

Can the pursuit of crunch go too far? Satpura, another specialty from Amritsar (where Mr. Mittal's wife grew up), is akin to a samosa but with just a dab of filling, snug inside seven gossamer strips of dough that bloom and blister in the fryer. It looks like a tiny book blown open in the heat of Vesuvius, all ravaged golden pages. Eat it horizontally, my server instructed, but I could never get it right; all I tasted was oil and shards.

Heaviness creeps in as the night unfolds. It's tricky to build a meal scaled for an intimate group. (If you can count your companions on one hand, that's too few.) Much of the menu is unabashed party food: chile cheese toast reimagined as a dense, goeey-headed pakora; a goat shami bun kebabs like brawny, exalted sliders, an emblem of the streets of Karachi and Lahore, Pakistan; and butter chicken that inverts the ratio of sauce to meat, with great chops of thighs on Frenched bones, not drowning in



PHOTOGRAPHS BY YUVRAJ KSHANN FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES



Top, Ambassadors Clubhouse, where the textured décor recalls a summer home in India that belonged to the restaurant owners' grandfather, who served as an ambassador for India in the 1960s. Left, the chef Karan Mittal. Clockwise from below: citrus fruit and frozen lassi chaat; near the bar; Amritsari chana kulcha; butter chicken; and beetroot raj kachori chaat.



AMBASSADORS CLUBHOUSE ★★

1245 BROADWAY (WEST 31ST STREET), NOMAD; 607-247-8870

Atmosphere Relaxed, lived-in, old-money splendor, Punjabi-style.

Service Chattily attentive and well versed in the intricacies of the menu.

Sound Level Voices at other tables fade under a heavy-bass groove of South Asian and diasporic hits that meld R&B, hip-hop, and garage.

Recommended Papads; raj kachori; paan patta and kala chana chaat; kid goat shami bun kebab; Dughar paneer tikka; Amritsari chana kulcha; matka Beliram lamb; methi romanesco and chana biryani; Kotkapura royal atta chicken; ma ki dal; cassata baked Alaska; citrus fruit and frozen lassi chaat.

Drinks The substantial wine list of 365 bottles is overshadowed by the cocktails, including the Patiala Peg (a take on an old-fashioned), poured tableside, and a colossal communal margarita in a glass decanter.

Price \$18 to \$60; large-format dishes for 2 to 4 people, \$120 to market price.

Open Daily for dinner and Saturday and Sunday for lunch

Reservations Accepted

Wheelchair Access The entrance and upper dining room are on street level; diners may take an elevator to the lower dining room. Spacious restrooms with hand rails are on each floor.

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.

saucy but more judiciously basted with it — perhaps the one moment when I wished for less restraint.

For dessert, rose-scented lassi ice cream fills a hollowed-out grapefruit, the lushness cut by clementines, Sumos and darkly blushing Moros. The lightness feels like a reprieve.

There are now enough high-end Indian restaurants in the city to compare and complain, to say, this naan is fluffier; that dal, inkier. If Ambassadors Clubhouse is not quite a revelation, it's in part because of this bounty, but also because Punjabi food was the gateway to Indian cuisine for many New Yorkers, thanks to the restaurants that



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started to proliferate on East Sixth Street in the 1970s.

And so? The familiar also has its pleasures. No one in this town seems to tire of yet another luxury iteration of steak frites or the millionth oozy red burger. Bring on the chaat and the kebabs. Surely there's room for it all.