



## THE NAVRATRA THALI WITH AN ARMANI CUT

### INDIAN ACCENT

Navratra Thali, Rs 850+VAT

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The top of the pops ... See how the chef has changed the definition of a dal by replacing lentils with the nutty *chironji*. It tastes so divine because of all the cream, butter and *ghee* that has gone into it.

You'll change your view on ... Raw banana. No one but Bengalis, who see it as the antidote to a running stomach, bother to cook it. The chef has turned it into a designer statement.

**T**HE Navratras are the two nine-day reprieves that the chickens of the city get from their ordained fate. For, even the most devoted carnivores turn into devout Hindus, and avoid just those ingredients of the good life they wouldn't miss even if their life depended on that act of abstinence.

No one dares to take liberties with the divine law on these days. A colleague, who's not the religious sort at the best of times, is convinced, for instance, that her previous relationship was doomed the moment she accepted an invitation to share a bottle of wine with friends during the last Navratras. So you get the drift.

It's definitely not like going to Bukhara on a Tuesday, when many people turn vegetarian, and assuaging your complaining conscience that it's OK to eat mutton *barras* at a restaurant and not at home. I would not have believed this had a manager at the Bukhara not informed me that the restaurant records its highest weekday sales on Tuesdays!

The Navratras are also the only time of the year when restaurant managers can expect to unwind, for food sales hit rock bottom, thanks to the refreshing air of religiosity that sweeps the city. Defenders of the food barriers in force during the Navratras are convinced it is a ritual that wise

by **Sourish Bhattacharyya**

people in the past had developed to prepare your body for the change of weather. The nine days give you a chance to detox. I don't buy into the argument, for if you stick to a balanced diet through the year, there's no reason for you to have *rotis* made with *kuttu ka atta*.

Hotels and restaurants roll out Navratra *thalis* to tempt people to come their way, but each offering sounds worse than the other. But my curiosity was tickled by the pictures that accompanied a media release announcing the Navratra *thali* put together by Chef Manish Mehrotra at Indian Accent. The hugely talented chef, who specialises in Oriental cuisine and has been responsible for the success of Tamarai in London, took up the challenge of making a palatable Navratra platter, and I must say it changed my opinion on the

potential of no-onion, no-garlic, no-cereal vegetarian food. If a chef lets loose his creativity, even such austere food can actually induce you to ask for more. And the Indian Accent *thali's* price (Rs 850 plus VAT) makes it a double treat.

It is a winner from the start. The Masala Arbi Satay, which comes crusted with poppy seeds, combines a crusty, glazed exterior with a delicate interior with flavours that just explode in the mouth. The beauty of the rest of the platter, Chironji Dal with Saffron Infusion, makes you wonder why chefs don't make use of this nutty ingredient. Add *chironji* to a standard *lauki ki sabzi*, and savour the edible drama on your palate. The Kuttu and Potato Rosti is a brilliant take on what I like to call the Swiss *aloo ki tikki*.

Another brilliant concoction is Makhni Zucchini Gratin—I have never had more appetising zucchini, which is now available in plenty and in different colours in neighbourhood markets. Again, it's a vegetable that Indian chefs

have been ignoring at their peril—it doesn't have any dominating characteristic, which makes it extremely amenable to a thoughtful touch of *masala*.

The Paneer Plantain Kofta (that's *kachcha kela*, which you'll have only if you're Bengali and suffering from the community's favourite ailment—a running stomach) comes alive in the squash curry sauce. Culinary creativity lies in the transformation of even the dullest ingredients—get a taste of it in the manner in which the chef has made the humble *kachcha kela* stand up and be counted.

A treat such as this can only end on a note of exultation, and it came in the form of the Mewa Makhana Kheer Brulee, which left a memorable taste in the mouth. Even the fresh fruit petit fours turned out to be a treat for the senses. What else can you call a watermelon square, cut with sashimi-like precision, and topped with a sliver of *kaju ki barfi*? With food like this, you'd want the Navratras to come more often.