

the clayoven

Like a phoenix, Indian landmark rises from the ashes

By Tricia Vanderhoof
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This Week

The Clay Oven on Route 46 West is in the process of celebrating its grand re-opening after a massive electrical fire in March 2010. A landmark Indian restaurant since 1999, it features classic Indian cuisine from northern and western India.

Crystal chandeliers and sconces sparkle above pristine white tableware and glassware. The spotless cutlery and water pitchers are hand-hammered. Linens are chocolate brown, and dark, upholstered, studded chairs grace tables that match the leather banquette along the far wall. Six arched windows bathe walls in soft afternoon light, and a buffet table is set up in a corner.

Owner Jitu Mehta beams with pride as he offers the dining menu, its cover embossed with a hand-crafted copper insert.

"It has taken us 15 months, but with the help of my landlord (Roxbury Circle Motel), Ledgewood, a forward-thinking architect and my staff, the wait was worth every day. It has been raised from the ashes.

"I have received over 200 emails that say 'welcome back.' Every phone call is a joy for me."

Traditional Indian music plays softly in the background. Music is integral to Mehta's philosophy on cuisine and hospitality.

"I believe very firmly that music and food must be harmonious. As music must be in accord with the ears, food must blend with the palate and neither must ever be discordant. Food must coordinate with right spices; like music, if the notes are not right, you don't appreciate it."

Coincidentally, Jitu's wife is named Sangeeta, which means harmonious music.

There are, of course, many Tandoor (cylindrical clay oven) selections on

the menu. A dish so prepared — often combined with herbs, yogurt and freshly-ground spices — is "tandoori," acclaimed by connoisseurs for a subtle, grilled flavor and unique tastes.

An important component of Sikhism was the concept of "langer" where people of all castes and creeds ate together as equals. Communities were urged to have common tandoors which, when lit for all, saved fuel and provided a way for all to socialize and feed hungry stomachs.

All dozen varieties of Clay Oven breads (naan) are cooked in a tandoor.

"The communal aspect of cooking is very important," Mehta says. "It is part of our hospitality, to share."

Mehta says that the only changes in cuisine from before the fire are in presentation and refinements to some of the recipes.

"We want to reflect our culture, and our cuisine stresses spices," Mehta says. "But newcomers are afraid to try us because they think Indian food might be too hot. Not at Clay Oven. If you ask us, we prepare your dishes with milder combinations of spices."

"I will not compromise on quality. Our barbecue items are of the finest, prepared with complex Indian marinades and charcoal-grilled to ensure authentic flavor. It is the process of proper marinating, temperature, and right cooking that makes food juicy and tempting."

Manny and Dahiana Sanchez from Mount Olive are here for the grand re-opening. They have been avid patrons since they moved to the area from Albany, N.Y.

"We fell in love with it, and we were heartbroken when fire destroyed it last March. As soon as it re-opened, we said, 'We've got to go' so here we are.



At the Clay Oven in Ledgewood, owner Jitu Mehta, center, is flanked by breadmaker Singh Lakhvinder, left, and Pal Singh, head chef. STAFF PHOTO BY JUSTINA WONG

I'm glad to see the quality hasn't changed; both the service and food are excellent," Dahiana says.

Tonight they both order Chicken Tikka (\$14) — "Without question, the best I've ever had," Manny says. "Very, very creamy and very savory" — a good choice for newcomers to Indian cuisine, with creamy grilled chicken simmered in a velvety sauce with a subtle flavor.

Manny says, "Sadly, we have to move again, this time to Minnesota, and we're really going to miss it. We'll be here again before we leave."

The Clay Oven remains family-friendly. Bill and Christina Mueller from Stanhope and her mother Ruby from Succasunna are seated with their three daughters and nephew who range in age from 6 months to 4.

Christina recommends Dal Makhani, a mixture of lentils and kidney-beans cooked with butter and spices, (\$10); Bhindi Masala, okra sauteed with tomatoes, onions and spices, topped with cilantro (\$11); any kind of naan, especially broccoli kulcha (\$4); and vegetable samosa appetizers (\$4). "Just wonderful!" she says. "We're so glad to see them back."

Surprisingly, there are no traditional statues of Ganesh — the Hindu god of success with the head of an elephant — on display.

Mehta smiles: "Tomorrow my brother is coming from India, and he is bringing one."

THE CLAY OVEN

WHERE: 1140 Route 46 East (corner of Route 10 West and Route 46 East), Ledgewood

TELEPHONE NUMBER: 973-252-7270

WEBSITE: www.theclayoven.com

HOURS: Lunch 11:30 a.m. to 3 p.m.; dinner 5 to 10 p.m.

CUISINE: Authentic Indian including vegetarian and vegan

PRICE RANGE: Appetizers from \$4, tandoor from \$12, chicken, lamb and seafood \$12 to \$19, vegetables served with basmati rice from \$10, breads from \$3

CATERING: Yes

PARKING: Ample lot

OCCUPANCY: 80

TAKEOUT: Full menu

PAYMENT: Major credit cards

ATTIRE: Casual

CHILDREN: Welcome

ATMOSPHERE: The mood is serene, tasteful and family friendly, attentive; hands-on management full of joy about complete rebuild after fire. Highly recommended: the mango lassi

OWNER: Jitu Mehta

Got a food establishment you'd like to read about? Tell us at contact@randolphroxburythisweek.com.

