

# Food for Thought: New York Cuisine Gets Indian Spark --- But Hold the Ghee: Tabla's Tastes Are Light and Direct

By Robert Templer

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## ABSTRACT (ABSTRACT)

One of the factors in the extraordinary resurgence in the past decade has been the admission of Asian or Asian-trained cooks into elite circles, bringing revitalizing energy to French and American cuisine. Nobuyuki Matsuhisa, who retooled Japanese food at Nobu, the Cambodian-born Sottha Khunn at the sumptuous Le Cirque 2000 and Vong's Jean-Georges Vongerichten, a Frenchman whose formative experiences were at Mandarin Oriental hotels, are now joined by another remarkable talent, Floyd Cardoz, at the Indian-influenced restaurant Tabla.

Mr. Cardoz's food, a mix of French and American brushstrokes with a palate of Indian spices and ingredients, has aroused passions. "People seem to describe the experience of eating here in sexual terms," he says.

Cynical New Yorkers, always looking for new tastes to excite jaded tongues, have taken to Tabla with a vengeance; the restaurant is packed although reservations were available even at the last minute. It has all of the foods of the moment -- foie gras, ox-tail, striped bass, cod and crab cakes -- but presented a twist with pepper, cardamom, cumin and coriander and set aglow with turmeric and a touch of chili. With the lightness and playfulness of contemporary American food, the skills and presentation of French cuisine and waves of spiced flavor from the best of regional Indian cooking, Tabla is likely to be much emulated. But few chefs will be able to replicate Mr. Cardoz's range of experiences and influences.

## FULL TEXT

The culinary cringe is over for good in New York City. That sense of inferiority about American cooking that nurtured an illusion that great cuisine was always French, and Paris was the center of the gastronomic universe, has been banished in favor of a blazing confidence. Awash in cash, open to anything and with a tooth-and-claw competition among restaurants, the city is a cauldron of innovation. The best chefs in the world now end up here.

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For Mr. Cardoz, Tabla is a stop on a long journey. Originally a biochemist, Mr. Cardoz decided he wanted to cook. He trained in India and Switzerland. He worked at the Taj Mahal Intercontinental in his hometown of Bombay and then moved to the Oberoi.

Feeling that the "food scene in India wasn't going anywhere," he decided he needed to move to the West. He ended up in New York, walking the streets in search of a job. Without experience in the city it was tough to find work outside of an Indian restaurant.

After cooking in a now defunct Indian eatery in Rockefeller Center, he landed a junior job at the acclaimed four-star Lespinasse at the St. Regis Hotel under the tutelage of the freethinking innovator Gray Kunz. During his six years at Lespinasse, a restaurant noted then for its adoption of Asian flavors, Mr. Cardoz rose to become executive sous-chef before joining Danny Meyer, owner of the acclaimed Union Square Cafe and a raft of other New York restaurants.

Tabla occupies a stylish space in the old Metropolitan Life Building, a vast Art Deco monument to masculine capitalism on Madison Square. A long bar dominates the downstairs while a rather intimidating staircase of deep red padauk wood leads upstairs to a dining room of vivid mosaics and dusty pink and green walls. Like the food, the design gives a nod to India without feeling constrained by tradition.

Dressed in severe black Nehru jackets, the staff look more like wealthy, trendsetting New Yorkers than the diners. Our waitress appeared to be Gwyneth Paltrow slumming for an evening. She started off with a speech reassuring us that the food was not really spicy hot, a perturbing and unnecessary gesture that compounded a mistake I made before the meal. Arriving too early, I set off for a walk around nearby Little India. Wandering among the stands of empty yellow cabs whose drivers were having dinner, my appetite was inflamed by the aromas of block after block of Indian restaurants. By the time I wandered back to Tabla, I craved kormas and masalas, thick creamy emulsions of spices and ghee.

But Tabla's food isn't like that. Cardoz uses very little butter in his food and the spicing is light and direct without the fat there to prolong the taste. A crab cake, with an evanescent Goan mix of spices -- ginger, garlic, turmeric and chilis -- came set atop a basket made from a papadum filled with creamy chopped avocado. The sweetness of crab and avocado were offset with some sharp tamarind sauce. A samosa of corn was light and greaseless but needed more punch and, my Heinz-obsessed fellow diner muttered, a lot more of the tomato ketchup than came with it.

Striped bass arrived encrusted with lentils, a crunchy foil for the fish. Soft-shelled crabs were perfectly cooked. The food is technically excellent and flawlessly presented, but seemed to lack the mouth-filling sensuality I expected. A little more fat and a little more heat in the spicing would draw out flavors that sometimes seemed curtailed and overly subtle.

The lunch dishes available in a less formal setting downstairs were, to my mind, better. The lamb was tender, juicy and crusted with spices and a seafood salad was a succulent, tangy mix of fish, prawns and mussels with small purple pickled onions. The downstairs menu also offers Tabla's innovative Indian bread, which come in flavors including pumpernickel, mustard seed and garlic, cinnamon-raisin, rosemary-olive oil and buckwheat and honey.

With these come a variety of hyphenated raitas like lemon-chive, and dips including a cheddar-cumin-chili fondue that has the oily, illicit appeal of melted Velveeta cheese. There are also some Indian pizzas -- one is topped with Goan spiced mushrooms.

These breads and dips were among the many enjoyable dishes at Tabla, where the food peripherals seem superior to the skilled but less-inspired main dishes.

Tabla's tamarind margarita is a drink that deserves a wider circulation, as does the alcoholic iced mango chai. The desserts by talented pastry chef Jackie Riley were also excellent -- in particular the banana-chocolate samosa with caramel-coriander ice cream. There is only one truly Indian dessert -- vanilla kulfi -- but this cone of ice-cream, fluttering a small flag of gold leaf, was an immeasurable improvement on the usual chalky, face-cream flavor of this dish.

A final touch, which leaves diners with a mouthful of spices, is a plate of clove-scented caramels and lemon-infused shortbread.

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Influences of India
Tabla is at 11 Madison Avenue, near 25th Street; Tel. 212-889-0667.
PRICE RANGE: Three-course prix-fixe dinner, \$48 (there are some supplements); five-course vegetarian tasting menu is \$65; the main tasting menu is \$75. Lunch appetizers, \$8 to \$18; main courses, \$17 to \$23; desserts, \$8. The wine list is reasonably priced for New York, with plenty of bottles that go well with the food.
HOURS: Lunch, Monday to Friday, noon to 2 P.M.; dinner, Monday to Saturday, 5:30 to 10:30 P.M. (until 11 Friday and Saturday). Closed Sunday.

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