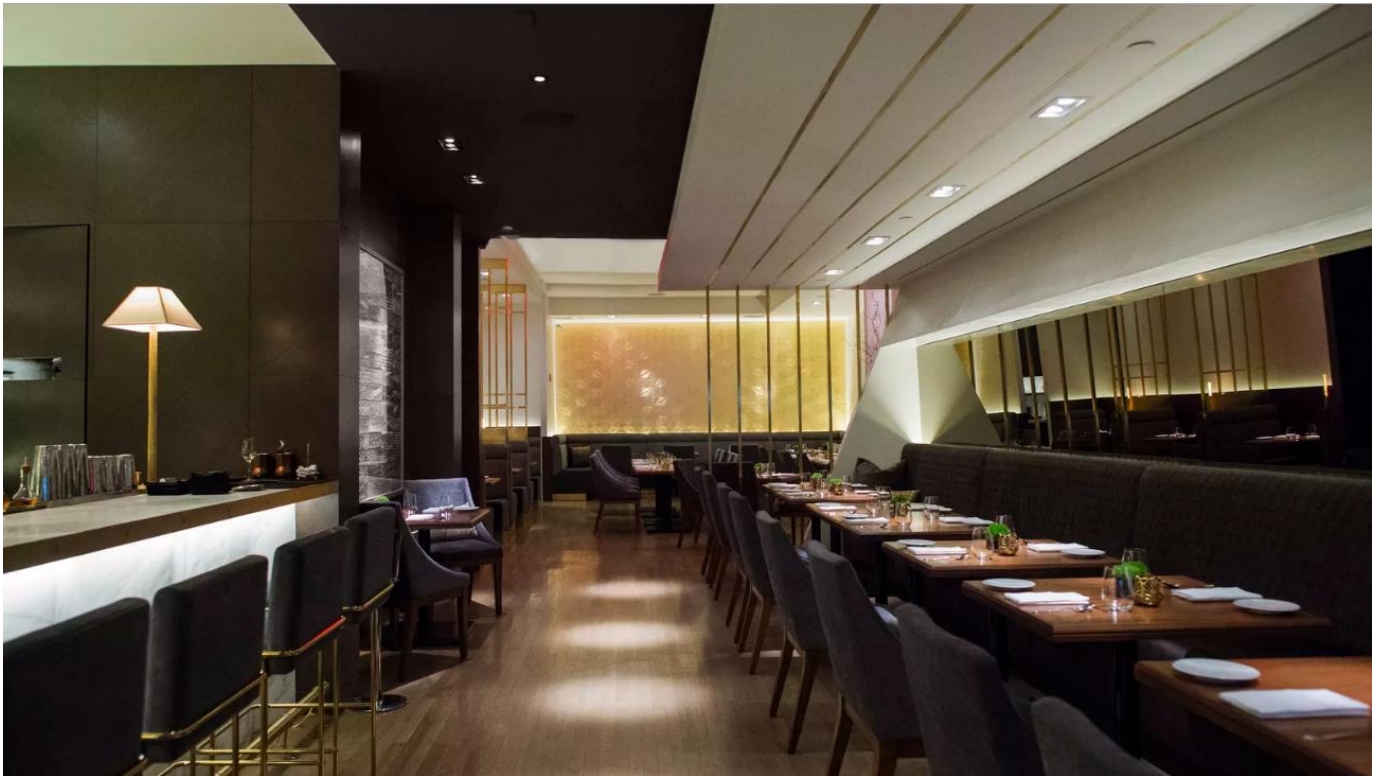




by Ryan Sutton, July 19, 2016

Indian Accent Gives a Boost of Energy to Midtown's Expense Account Dining Circuit

Two stars for the ritzy Indian restaurant in Midtown's Le Parker Meridien Hotel



One of the finest things on the Internet is a post titled, "Concepts With Which Boys at Parties Have Asked Me If I'm Familiar." The article, which is nothing more than a spreadsheet of terms like molecular gastronomy, Evil Twin Brewing, Oatmeal Stout, and GPS, is a tongue in cheek riposte against mansplaining. I bring this up because during my visits to the rose and saffron-scented Indian Accent in Midtown, waiters would often regale me with sometimes overly obvious preprandial pedantries before I was allowed to eat. Here's what I was told: That New Delhi is the capital of India (thank you). That kofta is also known as a meatball (really). And that a particular ingredient, I believe it was garam masala, is an "Indian word," a remark that almost led me to rhetorically ask which of the subcontinent's 150 languages he was referring to. I could go on.

Pete Wells referred to this phenomenon as "waitsplaining" in his review of this expensive restaurant in Le Parker Meridien Hotel, and in my visits, which all occurred after his, that policy was still in full effect.



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None of this is to say that a good story doesn't have its place at a restaurant. In our eye-rolling era of experiential eating and destination dining, chefs look to the spoken and written word to differentiate their wares from those of their bloodthirsty competitors on the annual World's 50 Best list. And there's something particularly pleasant about sitting inside the famed manure shed at Blue Hill at Stone Barns while the wait captain literally points out how the latent heat of compost is sous-viding your next course, because the visual imagery is right there, and because poop usually merits an explanation when it's involved in a \$1,000 meal.

But at Indian Accent, when you're halfway into a \$9 pastrami kulcha in a hotel on 56th Street and the manager swings by to talk about how Patna-born chef Manish Mehrotra was so overwhelmed by his first visit to Katz's that he just had to honor it with a dish on the menu, you want him to take it down a notch.

Let's instead focus on the more important story: Why this spinoff of a New Delhi restaurant, with its foie gras, black truffles, and other globally-inspired luxuries, is an absolutely vital addition to the Midtown dining scene and cocktail circuit.





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Keema, the rustic lamb and pea (or goat brain) stew that's often served on a bun – a South Asian sloppy Joe – is haute-ified here, to brilliant effect. A waiter ferries over a small ceramic crock, on top of which are two tiny cubes of yellow Portuguese pao bread. He removes the lid, and you start to get high on the drug known as cumin. A raw quail egg sits atop a small pile of crimson porridge. Stir in the yolk, then take a bite. The nostalgic sensation that follows, at least for this ex-suburbanite, is akin to consuming a spicier, fancified version of supermarket glass jar ground beef bolognese.

The aromatics are doubled when you dunk, because the cubes of sweet bread are laced with kaffir. That's a whole lot of flavor for a little pot of – wait for it – soy curd. This keema is free of animal protein. I'm told the dish is an ode to the chef's heritage. He grew up in a vegetarian house, but I like to personally imagine that it's a hat tip to the American culture of fake meat. Spectacular.

A bartender builds a spicy Moscow Mule in a copper tin and covers it with rose petals with the same abandon a fancy French waiter might shower white truffles over risotto. This is the perfume you use to reset your palate. And then you eat more keema.

Midtown will never be as popular among the cool kids as Bushwick or the East Village, but give Le Parker Meridien credit: The group put together what might be, and I mean this as a compliment, the wackiest collection of culinary establishments in any hotel, anywhere in New York. The flagship institution is Norma's, the original brunch-only restaurant, which serves doughnut French toast, pizza topped with bacon and eggs, and \$30 breakfast burritos until 3 p.m. Then there's Burger Joint, a kitsched-up hangout where people got their high-end junk food before Shack Shack stole its thunder. And now we have Indian Accent, which thrusts South Asian fare into Midtown's European-centric power dining circuit – where a \$90 four-course prix fixe (the asking price here) is not considered entirely outrageous. Add a platter of DIY kati rolls – supple ghee roasted lamb that's meant for wrapping in buttery rounds of roti – and that's a \$36 supplement for two.

Is it all worth it? I like to think it is. Few dishes have infected my consciousness as much as Mehrotra's blue cheese-stuffed mini naan, or his epic beef kebab with bone marrow sauce, wherein the meat is cooked through but it melts in the mouth as if it were a raw sea scallop. But there's a larger question worth musing upon for a second or two: As New York increasingly rallies around small plates and quirky wine bars as an antidote to the strictures of set menus, why is it that so many out of town chefs seem to think the best way to win over the hearts and minds of a skeptical clientele is by charging tons of money? Or are these chefs simply forgetting that this city isn't the culinary free-for-all it was in 2005, at the height of the pre-crash Gilded Age?

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[Tasting of papads, pathar beef kebab]

To its credit, Indian Accent serves an a la carte menu at the bar where it's a heck of a lot easier to get a seat than in the set menu dining room. And while the restaurant doesn't swing and swagger with as much character as hipper venues, you'll be able to hear your companions without shouting (not a bad thing) and you'll likely drink better too.

Wine director Daniel Beedle, late of Daniel, has put together a nearly unparalleled selection of aromatic whites by the glass, including a luscious Herman Weimer New York State gewurztraminer (rose), a golden Maurice Schoech Alsatian pinot gris (honey), and a nimble Schloss Schonborn kabinett riesling (apricots).

Pair that riesling to lend a touch of acidity to banana-colored jackfruit, slowly cooked until it has the gently chewy texture of goat. It sits on top of a soft phulka like a proper Indian tostada.

The vegetarian compositions, with a few noteworthy exceptions, are Indian Accent's best dishes. Mehrotra coats perfect squares of firm paneer with a see-through layer of spicy tomato sauce — a whisper of heat to counteract the fatty farmer cheese.

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He takes papadums, a gratis snack elsewhere, and turns the light as air crisps into an essay on regional Indian idiosyncrasies – potato papads from Benaras, sago (tapioca) versions from Maharashtra, rice papads from Kerala, wheat flour fenugreek khakhra from Gujarat, black pepper and urad dal from Punjab, and moong dal from Bikaner. He then matches them with a Twister board's worth of dips to justify (sort of) the \$22 price tag. Among those dips: a pot of Rajasthani pickled boar ("popular with royalty") amped up with mustard oil, a funky ramekin of shrimp balchao, and a nuclear green pool of hot pepper (a poor guy next to me accidentally shot it like it was tequila).

If only the management could find some way to work the cost of this exhilarating cracker course into the four-course \$90 menu.

Mehrotra takes curry-spiked duck confit and tops it with foie gras – a tired riff on a classic French pairing. A more subversive expression of luxury, however, comes in the form of dosas. A rice and bean crepe sits atop a pile of soft, slippery mushrooms. The first bites are more texturally interesting than flavorful. Then a whiff of wet, musky earthiness pervades the palate. What gives? Mehrotra flecks his dosas with black truffles. Some might raise their eyebrows at imbuing one of the world's humblest dishes with one of most expensive ingredients in the universe, but I have to say, it's a stunning combination.



[Ghee roasted lamb, makhan malai]



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Too bad Indian Accent intersperses its more creative fare with pedestrian plates. Forget the shredded chicken with peanuts, cucumbers, and avocado, a chilled, flavorless, ring mold-style vertical preparation (this isn't 2003). And skip the saccharine pork rib that wouldn't pass muster at Dallas BBQ, or the run of the mill sea bass. Indulge instead in the fried soft shell crab with intoxicating shrimp sauce, or the \$38 lamb. And be sure to order a few kulchas. These warm circles of bread are stuffed with ingredients of perfect clarity: spinach, butter chicken, sweet bacon, or pastrami and mustard (be prepared for a story about the last one, though).

I can't tell you how many times I heard Indian Accent's mythical story about the origins of makhan malai, a Northern Indian dessert that once involved using morning dew to turn cream into an ethereal puff. The luxurious creation is an edible king's pillow bedazzled with rose petals and gold leaf — and the Texan next to me started eating his halfway through the speech.