

The Advertiser

EATING OUT

Kamal Verma and Anil Verma.

Chingari Restaurant

25jan06

56 Main Rd, Nairne, phone 8388 0880

Dinner: 5pm-late, Wed-Mon.

Seating: 50. Wheelchair access and facilities: Yes. Owners Verma and co-chef Anil Verma.



The small Adelaide Hills town of Nairne was once on the food map as the home of Chapman's processed meats – fritz central for many South Australians. It was as old-school, rural South Australian as you could imagine: children were once paid to lead cattle and pigs up the main street to their demise.

Although Chapman's shut its doors in 2000 when interstate owners rationalised, the town hasn't changed much since. It has its own Millies Bakery outlet, the Millers Arms Hotel is a busy country pub, a couple of general stores stock the essentials and, in an unusual cultural quirk, the town is home to a fascinating furniture and collectables store, Upstairs Downstairs, stocked with intrigues from India's colonial era.

Now it also has an Indian restaurant, run by a former executive chef at the Hyatt Regency, Kamal Verma, who left the hotel last year and developed Chingari into a family affair, including his brother accompanying him in the kitchen.

The restaurant reflects the northern Indian and Kashmiri foods of Verma's upbringing, as well as all he learned from master chefs in Delhi where he trained at the capital's Sheraton Hotel.

The restaurant itself is a simple squarish space, with ochre-toned walls that have been decorated with extraordinary dresses and silver embroidery. There's modern Bollywoodish music, bottles of wine peeking out of beaten copper jugs and, more importantly, all the smells of the spice market pumping away at the senses when you arrive.

This is quickly reinforced with the sight of curly battered onion bhaji and tandoor platters passing by towards other diners – they all look so very good. All this and drinks happen with a minimum of fuss from such a young waitress, Kamal's daughter Fiona, who no doubt has done this kind of work before.

It's a Monday night, for goodness sake, and the place is half-full and she's fully coping with the hungry inside and the takeaways and a young gang signing up for Kamal's smart new curry club concept, a combo diner and regional Indian cooking demonstration that he's begun each month.

The first, last Thursday, was booked out, which indicates the word is well and truly out.

First to the drinks: the wine list is well and truly basic, there's a mango lassi, as you'd expect (untried) and 10 beers including Kingfisher, from Delhi, though brewed under licence offshore.

It comes to the table colder than any beer drunk in years and for this we can be thankful – it's a thirst-quencher beyond belief.

Prawn pakora begins proceedings: eight good'uns dipped in a light and airy chickpea batter with a spicy mint chutney to one side, a tamarind chutney sauce that is deftly sweet and sour to the other. Superb.

A tandoor platter also shows a mixed palate of colours, paler chicken, bright red lamb and prawns, all with distinctive variances in flavour, which clearly reveals itself as the art of Chingari's kitchen brigade.

Main-course curries come in quaint beaten copper pots, and a table full is a splash of colour and subtle tastes. The butter chicken is bright fire-engine red and has a spritely tomato essence still strong in the creamy sauce – the distinctive spice here is mace powder, Kamal reveals later.

A vegetarian potato dumpling curry has a nutty flavour and texture, and is highly desirable. Lamb saag gosh with spinach is darker in nature and very earthy – the lamb pieces tender and rich.

Tandoori duck comes on a large boat-shaped plate and is surprisingly dark crimson red, with its Kashmiri chilli sauce, that retains a pleasing aromatic edge. It's the hottest dish and a tad raw in the fire department, but still very distinctive.

The notable thing here is that all the sauces are superbly rich, creamy, smooth and not oily. They've been freshened with the crunch of ginger and other bright ingredients, each with clear and defiant flavour cooked with a seasoned touch.

Likewise the yellow rice, perfumed just that bit by a clever dose of saffron. There's a choice of Indian breads, too, and while ours come a touch too well done, they have crunch and life to give further excitement at the table.

Desserts are a boon, also. Mango culfi is all real fruit flavour given a boost by the addition of pistachio and chopped maraschino cherries. It's devoured. Gulab jamun, often overly perfumed with rosewater and ruined by sickly syrup, here is treated with much more respect: light, floury milk dumplings rather than sinking, doughy weights. The syrup is to be praised. Tops.

Everything here has been a terrific surprise. Every dish has been touched by a highly trained chef – the spice blends are fresh and well balanced, the accompaniments treated with huge respect and the sauces highly refined. A real treat.

The bill

Entrees: \$8.50-\$15.50

Body: Mains: \$10.50-\$22.50

Desserts: \$5.50-\$9.50

Vegetarian options: Plenty

Corkage: \$10/bottle

Wine list: Fairly basic; nearly all by the glass

Summary

Surprising little northern Indian, with a family touch and highly refined cooking across the whole menu.

Score: 15.5

Ratings – Below 10: Don't bother. 11: Barely passable. 12: Some interest. 13: Shows promise. 14: Good. 15: Recommended. 16: Really good. 17: Excellent. 18: Exceptional. Above 18: Fabulous dining experience. All restaurants are visited unannounced and meals paid for by *The Advertiser*.

– **Tony Love**