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A culinary journey from Charleston's low country to the Malabar coast of India

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Photography Bailli Paula Traktman Duncan, Dame Louise Konrath, Chevalier Stephen Duncan

India is a vast country encompassing numerous ethnic groups and religions, a myriad of languages, different climates, terrain and crops; its cuisine mirrors this diversity. Although we often refer to "Indian cuisine", this is far too simplistic. Vibrant colors, the central use of lentils, chickpeas, and vegetables, and a broad palette of spices and herbs characterize Indian cuisine. With the desire to explore Indian culinary traditions, we visited Rivayat, a new and highly praised restaurant in Charleston on March 23rd. Rivayat is a stylish venue featuring a blend of classical Indian dishes and creative new ideas. The three Chefs are from Kerala, located on the southwestern Malabar Coast of India. Kerala is known not only for its spices but also for its seafood, which is reflected in the seafood-intensive menu at Rivayat.

The décor is warm and inviting, featuring dark wood and beautiful murals; the service is attentive and very welcoming. The vibrancy of the food was matched by beautiful serving dishes. Our 15 guests were seated at one long table and shared a generous meal family style. We were offered Barcava Brut Cava, a delicious and perfect accompaniment as we began our meal. This crisp and fruity sparkling wine is produced by the Cavas Masachs winery in Spain, and is blended from indigenous Macabeo, Xarel-lo and Parellada grapes.

Our appetizers included Gun Powder Dosa, thin savory crepes made from a fermented batter of rice and ground black gram lentils. The crisp dosa was filled with potato and a spicy masala and was served with a variety of sauces and chutneys. The gunpowder accompaniment is made from lentils, sesame seeds, dried red chilis, curry leaves, coconut and asafoetida, mixed with ghee prior to serving. A second appetizer was Calicut Calamari an Indian presentation of calamari rings that was tangy, spicy and delicious. The final appetizer,

, Cauliflower Manchurian, was a table favorite, and featured a piquant garlic soy sauce. Each of these dishes offered unique textures, colors and flavors.

We were then served 5 main courses along with basmati rice and Naan bread.

Entrees included:

- Lamb Saag, featuring tender cubes of lamb in a rich sauce of creamed spinach enriched with garlic, onion and cumin, finished with a pinch of nutmeg.
- Chicken Tikka featured velvety strips of chicken tenderloin marinated in mild, dark byadagi chili before roasting in a Tandoor oven.
- The third dish was Jingha Mast Mast, containing prawns marinated with yogurt and Ajwain seeds. “Mast mast” means both delightful and enjoyable, an apt title for this delicious dish!
- Navrastan Pista Korma was a vegetarian dish cooked in a mild cashew and almond creamy sauce and topped with pistachios.
- Finally, Nadan Meen Curry highlighted swordfish cooked slowly with coconut milk, shallots and Kashmiri chilis.

Although each guest might have their own favorite, all of the dishes were delicious and strikingly each had a different texture and unique flavor. There was an excellent mix of “saucy” and “dry” dishes, varying sauces and distinct spice profiles. This was a feast!

Finally, we finished the meal with a refreshing and light dessert of Honey Cardamom Gelato, a wonderful example of “fusion cuisine”. This cleansing, aromatic and delicious dessert brought the meal to a sweet close.

Sujith Varghese, the young, entrepreneurial and creative owner of Rivayat (as well its sister restaurant, Spice Palette) says that his “goal was to develop an elegant Indian restaurant in Charleston, paying tribute to the coastal flavors his parents grew up with in Kerala and taking advantage of Charleston’s bounty of local seafood and growing love for global cuisine”.

“Rivayat” means tradition, and the restaurant emphasizes that their food features “flavors born of Indian tradition”, which is evident. The Chefs are developing new dishes continually, working closely with Charleston purveyors to bring Kerala and our low country closer together. We barely scratched the surface of Rivayat’s offering, and we can’t wait to go back!

