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Copper, Modern Cuisine of India

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311 East Blvd., Charlotte, NC

Phone 704-333-0063



Catalina Kulczar

Owner Pannu Singh and waiter Pradip Ghimiri of Copper, Modern Indian Cuisine

**critic's review**

It's About Time

review by Tricia Childress

2005-07-20

As Charlotte's number of Indian restaurants has grown and the popularity of this complex cuisine has increased, I had wondered how long it would be before a restaurateur dared to open a "fine dining" Indian restaurant in town. This restaurant would not have to be along the lines of those gorgeous lavish emporiums of Danny Meyer's Tabla in New York or London's Bombay Brasserie, but upscale nonetheless. I have heard numerous times from local Indian cuisine aficionados that Charlotte needs a place beyond the "one sauce fits all" and the immurement of pile 'em high lunch buffets.

Then suddenly, with three taps of a Riedel wine glass, **Copper, Modern Indian Cuisine** appeared in the Mayer house in Dilworth.

Owner Pannu Singh, a native of the Punjab, opened Copper in June after extensive renovations. Singh also owns Nawab, an Indian restaurant in Roanoke, VA. Copper's managing partner is Amit Kumar, a native from New Delhi. Singh opened Nawab, Roanoke's first Indian restaurant, in 1997 with a traditional menu and daily lunch buffet. Singh still lives in Roanoke, a valley he loves. But he and his partner were looking for a larger metropolitan area to open an upscale Indian restaurant and yet remain close to Roanoke. Charlotte was an obvious choice. Singh said, "Charlotte is a bigger market and has people who will appreciate this food. Charlotte has 12 Indian restaurants so people here are familiar with Indian food. We did wine dinners in Roanoke (at Nawab) and the result of all those years was learning what people liked. People appreciate our food presented in a modern way."

Opening Copper's heavy front door is déjà vu all over again. For decades, this historic house has been the site of a half dozen restaurants, most notably Eli's and Castaldi's. The door opens and you are once

again in the familiar front hall of the house which once housed author Carson McCullers. In this house, she wrote the beginning chapters of *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*.

Old houses lend themselves to small charming rooms and a secluded kitchen. The bar is still in the back left room and the other rooms have been decorated with themes: turban, polo, red and yoga. I've always enjoyed the small enclosed glass porch on the front of the house. This ceiling has been painted with clouds, and a message translated as "May God bless every living creature in the world" greets those who enter. Tables are set with linen and extremely cool utensils.

The wine list has about 50 bottles and is well chosen for the cuisine. Prices range from \$29 to \$215 and wines are served in Riedel glasses. Wines by the glass are also offered. Popular at many tables were 22-ounce bottles of Indian beers such as Flying Horse, and the beer list also includes King Fisher and Maharaja.

In the kitchen is Naveen Sadana, a native of India, who was the chef at Nawab. Copper's menu offers three types of entrees: "Traditional," "Modern" and "For the Gourmands." Traditional offers the better-known Indian dishes: tandoori, vindaloo and tikka. But the adventurous diner will not be disappointed with the Gourmand selections: Masala lamb chops with achaari curry sauce and vegetable biryani, garam masala-dusted salmon with nariyal-nirangi sauce and mixed vegetable bhaji, and a paneer Napoleon with roasted spiced vegetables, dal and masala aloo. Singh said, "It's 100 percent Indian in a modern way." One of the primary differences is the number of flavorful sauces used: 13.

The parade of dishes began with complimentary hot naan with a trio of dipping sauces: mint, mango chutneys and cooling raita. These set a lively standard for Copper's real appetizers, which are served in modern proportions and are more for the curious than the starving. The Potli Samosa duo were crispy packets stuffed with mellow vegetables sparked by a chili mint sauce. Less dynamic were the cold, dense and bland lentil patties.

But it's the entrees that should offer enough enticements to merit year-round patronage. Copper creates dishes that show the diversity of the Indian sub-continent with its wide-ranging and current culinary influences. The densely flavored sauce of the chicken tikka masala received effusive praise from the table. You will need to order more roti or naan to sop up this velvet pool. Even better were the perfectly grilled lamb kebabs teamed with thinly sliced portabella mushrooms and a methi curry sauce.

Dessert is almost an afterthought, but the rice pudding is a fine dish nevertheless. Service, particularly the wine service, is exceptional. Entrée prices range from \$13 to \$19.

On the way out, we stopped by the table of a local architect. "Isn't this great," he said. Yes, we've been waiting a long time.

*Have a restaurant tip, compliment, complaint? Do you know of a restaurant that has opened, closed, or should be reviewed? Does your restaurant or shop have news, menu changes, new additions to staff or building, upcoming cuisine or wine events? Note: We need events at least 12 days in advance. Fax information to Eaters' Digest: 704-944-3605, or leave voice mail: 704-522-8334, ext. 136. To contact Tricia via email: [tricia.childress@creativeloafing.com](mailto:tricia.childress@creativeloafing.com).*