



PRICELESS AT PAPADAM: FLAVORS OF INDIA

I heard that Papadam restaurant is serving the best Indian food in the city?

That's the word on the street shared by *foodies* in the know about this quaint Indian eatery on the Upper East Side, and I think they're right. *Really right.*

I had the pleasure of eating here on several occasions recently, and I'm pleased to report that once any adventuring diners cross the threshold beneath the attractive maroon awning of Papadam, they will be duly rewarded with nothing less than the most marvelous Indian dining experience west of Gujarat, India.

Yes, I said that. And yes, I mean that. Read on, please.

Like many have previously stated, the entrance to Papadam is "modest." Well, what they don't tell you is that this unsuspecting façade poised between two convenience stores at 1448 First Avenue guards a gem of a restaurant. And that is no overstatement. Papadam may be small, but like any brilliant-cut diamond, it's awesome in every way.

This is not your run-of-the-mill neighborhood Indian joint peddling a menu lineup of the usual culinary suspects, because what they do here at Papadam is closer to true Indian "cuisine" rather than cheap eats piled too high--get that idea in a big way. Papadam restaurant is also unlike, but better than, the high-minded old stalwarts of East 58th street and even less remotely like the latest wave of trendy "Curry Hill" Indian restaurants that line Lexington Avenue in the East 20s. And what of the downtown East 6th street Desi offerings? Nope. Not an East Village hipster's chance we're goin' there. (With the exception of one or two newer Indian-styled eateries and a notable lounge, the entire length of East 6th street between First and Second Avenues is sorely in need of renovation--if not complete demolition.)

If a pound-for-pound restaurant award were given for best restaurant in the city then Papadam would be a clear contender.

Within the most competitive restaurant scene in the world featuring multimillion-dollar budgets, astronomical rents, celebrity chefs, and hyper-cultivated *foodies*, the Papadam style in all its diminutive crystal-chandelier-meets-exposed-brick glory does something very few restaurants do anymore, which is to deliver an *affordable* dining experience worthy of true culinary praise with considerate, pitch-perfect service that is neither trendy nor aloof. These are beautifully rendered classics at Papadam not trendy, hyper-modern attempts for the sake of novelty.

Let's quickly preview Papadam by way of the movies. Have any of you seen the recently released gastronomic comedy/drama film *The Hundred-Foot Journey* starring Om Puri and Helen Mirren? It has been panned by some critics as "food porn at its best and worst," but overall, it's light summer film fare about the journey of an extraordinary Indian family who bring their family's renowned cuisine to a small French village after the tragic loss of their restaurant in India. The heart pulling plot revolves around the unlikely culinary rise of the talented eldest son, played by Manish Dayal, who enlivens any kitchen he works in with his culinary genius, a gift provided by his mother's tutelage and soulful wisdom during his childhood. If you would like to experience the closest *authentic* thing to that film--minus any questionable Eurocentric clichés--just go to Papadam; the chef in the kitchen at Papadam is real and better than any too pretty fiction for the very palatable reason that you can actually savor his expert culinary creations. No trip to France required.

There are many Indian restaurants scattered throughout the city serving a menu that may appear similar to Papadam, but make no mistake, they are not preparing dishes with the subtle genius of Papadam. Why? The answer is devastatingly simple. The cuisine at Papadam is unique because its owners and chef reinvigorate the Indian classics in a fresh, new way by using cooking techniques long-forgotten by others.

Before we continue, I want to share that I'm a 48-year-old native Manhattanite who has



dined in most of the better known--and lesser known--Indian restaurants in the city, Queens included, got that? I'm a fiend for Indian cuisine and know all the variations on bad, good, and great Indian fare, which includes sweet and savory street chaat to high cuisine houses. Oh yeah, one more thing: I've lived in Southeast Asia too. Doesn't that geographic fact count for something? And to all my Desi doubters, I've enjoyed the real thing on plenty of occasions too: home-cooked meals at Didi's house--feel me?

From Kashmiri kebabs to mind-blowing curries and simple chapatis to celebratory six-foot-long Tamil dhosas, I've had the pleasure. (My waistline proves it too.) Also know that I've got a culinary handle on Bengali, Pakistani, Kashmiri, Hyderabad, Kerala, and Sinhalese variations on the theme of Southeast Asian food too. (Don't get me started on the music either. I can sing along to any ol' Punjabi favorite--Lata Mangeshkar to rave Bhangra!--bring it.) So, I think I got some "cred" and know like Shiva's spinning wheel what I'm talking about when I say that this little palace of goodness called Papadam is the best Indian restaurant in the city--period. If the food is the main consideration above all else, make the trip to East 75th street and First Avenue.

Still don't believe me? Okay, we'll go through some of the menu, but first try the deceptively simple cauliflower appetizer known as Lasuni Gobi. I dare you.

Its light crunch from a perfect flash fry of thin batter encasing each cauliflower floret sets up well for the piquant garlic and herb-infused tomato sauce the florets will be served in. This oh-so-seductive starter does everything that an appetizer should do, which, like a form of tantalizing foreplay is to excite your been-there-done-that palate for the main dish. (I've only had a similar cauliflower starter this accomplished at a Saveur magazine-inspired sit-down dinner given by a prominent retiring chef years ago.)

How about velvet-like coconut soup? Yep, it's at Papadam, and you'll be glad you ordered it. There is also the excellent and poetic "Hari Bhari Tikki." This spinach and potato cake appetizer is spiced and subtly set on fire by a culinary cadre of green chilies, coriander leaves, and ginger, which is then grilled on a skillet and brought to your table by the attentive waitstaff. And YES! It happens to be only \$6.95--*not* \$14.95!



(On that note: I'm *really* tired of the seemingly ubiquitous \$14-\$18 appetizer price around town. Not every restaurant menu is deserving. I'll just leave it at that.)

You'll find that the reasonable menu prices at Papadam are incentive enough to order a proper three-course meal and enjoy an entire evening of fine dining. Do you wish to impress friends?

Then order five courses and prepare for liftoff because you're flying to the moon in fine Indian style! Please understand that both non-vegetarian and vegetarian dishes share the menu limelight equally on the expansive and ever-changing menu.

While your waiting for your appetizers or dinner course, you have just enough time to sip a sunset orange mango martini prepared by Ajay Jaggi, your understated co-host owner, who doubles as the wise and wizard-like barkeep. He will set your mind pleasantly floating above any of your work-related woes courtesy a caring word or with the help of his two friends, vodka and vermouth. And yes, that's the idea here at Papadam, a pleasant and understated culinary journey--Ajay, another please! Papadam also offers a spot-on selection of better Indian and domestic beers to keep your whistle wet.

Before I forget, at the top of your table, you will find a rectangular condiment boat with three unassuming chutneys brought to you by your excellent Papadam waiter and served with the quarter moon-shaped peppered cracker bearing the namesake of the restaurant.

On one side of your chutney boat is a minty green coriander chutney (which gives new life to the usually watered-down, swamp-green version served at lesser restaurants); on the other side is a sweet mahogany-toned tamarind, and poised innocently between them is the "chef's special" red chutney. Don't ignore. The triple chutney offerings here are not to be overlooked. However, the center red chutney is the star: a date, cumin, and tomato chutney that will, all by its sinful self, own your pleading mouth in a Punjabi minute.

Between courses politely ask the owners why they named the restaurant "Papadam," and cute-as-they-get co-owner, Kalpana Jaggi will likely share a memorable childhood story worth listening to. Kalpana, in case you don't know, is the glittering doll visiting each table like a perfectly charming hostess should. Mind you, as attractive as she is, I overheard that she's a Capricorn and smart as a whip. Consider yourself served.

(Chutney note: everyone raves about this little red chutney; the owners are trying to jar it for both the restaurant website shopping cart and in-store purchases--stay tuned.)

Let's talk tandoori, shall we? As previously stated, Papadam is special due to their ability to turn out the Indian classics in a fresh, original way; however, this sentiment is especially true for the tandooris. Keep in mind that *at the least*, you will be having these classic menu items prepared as they were originally intended, not like the multitude of uninspired, dried-out culinary cliches you've been abused with for so long.

So sure, most Indian houses turn out some type of reddish-colored chicken they call "tandoori," all too often with a humdrum pile of white rice and tepid, gruel-like dhal riding shotgun, but what happens at Papadam is damn near miraculous. The chicken or lamb is actually and truly mouthwatering. Juicy meats never had it so good!

And why exactly is the tandoori-anything here so good you may ask? Well, it may have something to do with the custom tandoori ovens installed at the restaurant, but it's also the uniquely seasoned yogurt coating that envelops your choice of meat, which produces a sublime blanket of tenderizing milky love.

That tandoori recommendation goes especially for the Papadam tandoori lamb chops. (Yes, food fanatics, I said "lamb chops tandoori.") Presented on either the assorted grilled platter, or on their delectable own, they will tempt any new vegetarians to forget their vows of dietary purity--the ashram can wait!

(Special note to vegetarians: It's worth mentioning that the co-owner married couple, Kalpana and Ajay Jaggi, are also faithful vegetarians, so, jokes aside, it's all good here. Everyone, vegetarians and non-vegetarians alike, will be equally happy.)

How many of you have had seekh kebab? Hailing from North India through Pakistan and the nearby mountainous regions along the old Silk Road into Central Asia, the ground lamb seekh kebab is hardly new, but what is often the case at a typical Desi cafeteria is that they're prepared many hours beforehand and left to just sit on the counter drying out waiting to be consumed much later in the afternoon or evening--even days later--by unsuspecting customers.

Don't get me wrong, I love spiced meat, especially for a fast snack or lunch, so even somewhat dried-out kebabs are okay by me. Add a bit a creamy raita and i'll easily eat a half-dozen with a smile. But what if you could have them *made fresh* and sent piping hot to your table, say, ten minutes or so after ordering? (Paleo diet people listen up.)

Papadam, in contrast to its competitors, does something I have NEVER witnessed in New York, much less rarely across Southeast Asia, which is to make the kebabs *fresh per order*. It goes like this: first they take freshly minced lamb meat and blend with a wickedly original blend of spices, shape into its customary sausage-like shape to initially grill, *and then follow this with a baked-to-perfection* visit to the oven.

At Papadam, the spices dancing about in each mouthful of kebab are a sophisticated blend of culinary choreography that I have not previously encountered--a *rasa* of amazement would perfectly describe my initial reaction. They are, simply put, the best kebabs I've ever had the pleasure of devouring.

It's worth saying that the style of kebab I refer to here is known as a "gelafi" seekh kebab. They are a devilish red in color yet moist and fresh. The Papadam gelafi seekh kebabs are not to be mistaken for the typical (and kinda unappealing) burnt brown versions piled up at other restaurants. Four of these masterful gelafi kebabs are placed upon each ordered plate at Papadam, and trust me, you will be sated like a Mughal sultan from these juicy red messengers of spicy awesomeness. (Kebab note: Papadam also offers a "chef's special mixed kebab plate" comprised of malai kebab, haryali and gharwali kebabs. This dish is superb too.)

The expressive word that most comes to mind when eating any of the splendid tandooris or kebabs at Papadam is "Faaabulouous!" (Warning: you will hear this word involuntarily bouncing around your mind throughout your entire dinner at Papadam.)

I recommend the tandooris with an order of the fragrant coconut rice. Yes, the rice dishes too will float memorably in your mind until you journey back home to Papadam on your next visit.

Other menu items dazzle too, so take your pick: sweet and savory butter chicken served with feather-light rumali roti? You won't find better. Legendary "*Papadam 65*" chicken? Its hot-to-trot chillies and mustard seeds will delight. The fresh daily catch in Ajay's Bengali curry fish sauce? Incredible and unforgettable.

Paneer chilli? Absolutely. Creamy sweet korma or breathtaking vindaloo? Double YES! Sofiyani or dum pukht gosht biryani? They're all truly great. Don't forget the light-as-a-cloud mango mousse for dessert!



And naturally, if you're in the area of Papadam during lunch hours, they even offer the much-requested and sought after Papadam Indian buffet for \$11.95--seven days a week!

I found the buffet sumptuous and just simply flat-out better than all the other offerings around town. Its calling card is the fact that it's fourteen courses!

The buffet also changes daily; it's not the *same ol' same ol'* buffet lineup each day. Be sure to have some cinnamon and clove rice with your tasty Chettinad chicken and chana dal.

And remember, timing is everything with a buffet. Get there early!

Speaking of "home," I heard it straight from the whispering Ganges herself that the new Mayor of New York City and his family adore Indian cuisine?

Well, someone please tell Mayor Bill de Blasio that Papadam is just down the street from Gracie Mansion. The mayor and his family could easily stroll down the East River Promenade to the restaurant for dinner or have Papadam deliver to their new home on Carl Schurz park.

And hey, why stop with the Mayor of New York? The newly elected Indian Prime Minister, Narendra Modi, makes his first visit to the United Nations soon. No doubt he will be visiting Papadam too!

Finally, It is not unusual to hear Papadam diners speaking across tables about how great their meal is. And just like any better neighborhood Manhattan restaurant there is a faithful set clamoring to be seated down by the owner's corner table. Kalpana will oblige if she can, naturally.

The conversation at Papadam is unpredictable but always politely engaging: politics, economics, off-street NY parking, gold mining, Yankees baseball, medical and health trends, cricket, literature and who knows what else.



Is there a poetic pūjā-like sentiment that reflects the spirit of Papadam?

I think so:

**"I had hoped to build a rainbow bridge
marrying the soil to the sky."**

--Sri Aurobindo, *A God's Labor*, July 31, 1935

There is magic at Papadam.

Enjoy!

PS: One more fabulous Papadam thing: feel free to ask Ajay or Kalpana to make you a special combination of Papadam menu favorites. They will select and serve a variety of menu *flights* for an unforgettable "Flavors of India" evening. Think of it like a "bespoke Indian dinner" reflecting your every desire. Isn't that nice?

Papadam: Flavors of India
1448 First Avenue, NY. NY. 10021
Reservations are recommended

212-879-6000
info@papadamnyc.com