

DINING OUT

New 'Piquant' raises the bar on grills

FINE DINING

Piquant Bread Bar and Grill

349A George St., New Brunswick.
Hours: 11:30 a.m.-3 p.m. Mondays,
11:30 a.m.-9:30 p.m. Tuesdays-
Wednesdays, 11:30 a.m.-11 p.m.
Thursdays-Fridays, 1-11 p.m.
Saturdays, 1-9 p.m. Sundays.
BYOW. Major credit cards. Casual
dress. Wheelchair accessible.
Reservations: (732)246-2468.

★★★

BY CODY KENDALL
FOR THE STAR-LEDGER

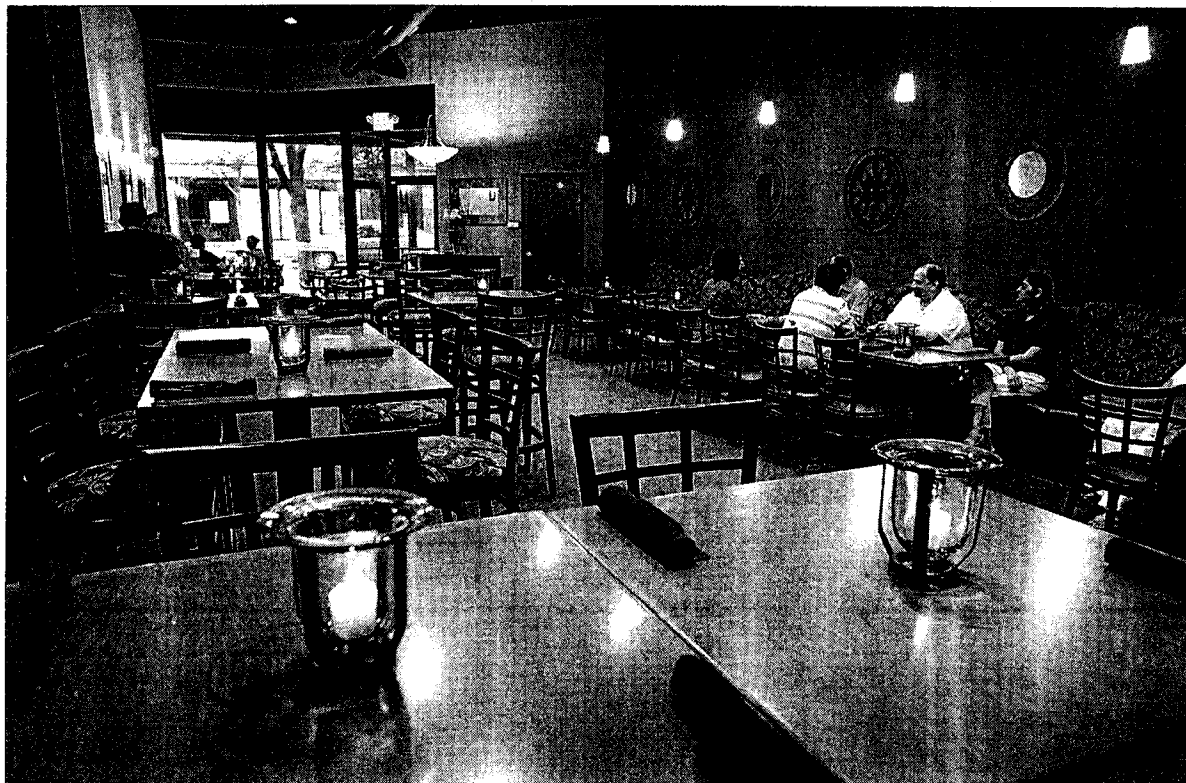
Piquant Bread Bar and Grill, which became part of New Brunswick's lively restaurant scene in May, deserves a wide audience.

The name might be a stumbling block, depending on how you read it. The proper way is Piquant Bread Bar (pause) and Grill, not Piquant Bread (pause) Bar and Grill. Aside from the fact that this place doesn't have a liquor license, it's about as far from being a bar and grill as you can imagine.

This airy, tasteful space, with a preponderance of grays and browns in the color scheme, is nicely restrained. It features polished wood tables, comfy banquettes along one wall, hanging lights and sconces for a clean, peaceful look. The plates are glass with trim of green, gold, coral and red.

The rest of the color is provided by the food, which zings all the senses for a most unusual experience. If I only had a few words to sum up the place, they would be: All-India eclectic Indian cuisine. But that doesn't begin to describe the menu's healthful brush with fusion. It includes notes of the Caribbean (mango soup with ginger and Jamaican rum, \$6, or shrimp cocktail with charbroiled pineapple and brandy sauce, \$14); Thailand (Thai shrimp salad, \$12) and Italy (chicken breast with baby spinach, basil and ricotta over fettuccine in tomato butter sauce, \$18).

But the Indian elements are what I enjoyed most about this establishment, owned by chef Kirti



TONY KURDZUK/THE STAR-LEDGER

The Piquant Bread Bar and Grill is not a "bar and grill" in the standard sense, but a unique and gentle taste of exotic Indian cuisine.

Rahi, a native of Delhi who left a career in information technology to devote herself to food. She was trained at the Natural Gourmet School in New York City and apprenticed at Tabla in Manhattan.

Her gifts, however, are obviously her own, including an eye for compatible hues and intertwining flavors that are instantly companionable, even if they may have never met before.

The Indian food may be geared to the American palate, but it is not dumbed-down. Rather, it's subtle rather than searing, offering a gentle taste of the exotic, not an aggressive approach that could singe those whose systems aren't prepared for it.

Now, about the bread bar. For \$12, you get a choice of eight

bread, seasonal vegetables, rice, salad, yogurt sauce and dal makhni (a lentil dip) or chana pindi (a chick pea spread.) For \$5 more, the chicken special of the day comes along for the ride.

The breads are amazing. They include a cauliflower bread with ground pomegranate seeds; rosemary with cheddar cheese and crushed red pepper; caramelized onions with fresh basil and potato with fresh mint, shallots and ground pomegranate seeds, and several others. Consider your experience with Indian bread you may have eaten elsewhere, then take another big step up. Now you've got the idea. If you just want the bread, it's \$4 and worth it for the lift and rainbow of sensations provided.

The grill part of the name refers to the number of grilled items on the menu. They run the gamut from a vegetable burger (\$12) with cucumber mango salsa and terra chips to lamb chops (\$28) that retain their delicate flavor, flirting with a veil of mint vinaigrette and accompanied by roasted peppers and fingerling potatoes.

Coriander-crusting grilled shrimp (\$23) is the only other dish at Piquant that runs more than \$20. It comes with a mint tabbouleh, pineapple salsa and lime, the citrus, mint and coriander all working together to transform the shrimp into a completely different kind of crustacean than the one to which you may be attuned.

Grilled paneer cubes (\$18) aren't what I usually think of when

discussing grilled cheese. It's a non-melting style of firm farmer cheese, cut in cubes and enlivened (since it's plain on its own) by mint sauce and pineapple corn salsa.

Chicken tandoori (\$18) also has a distinct personality, with a Brazilian tomato and coconut sauce setting it apart from the usual version of this favorite.

It's possible to skip the entrees and make a meal of the appetizers, soups and salads that are offered. You'll start with complimentary rice puffs, made for dipping in tamarind, coriander and apple sauces. Then there's a mint, tamarind and coriander "cocktail" in a shot glass, a drink we were advised to chug as a pre-dinner digestif.

Ah, now you're ready to eat. Can't get enough paneer? Start

with marinated batter-coated paneer (\$7), which I interpreted the Indian version of mozzarella carozza.

Want real mozzarella? It's available with tomatoes and a basil aigrette (\$8), but why not be more venturesome and try the chiol tikka (\$10) served with shredded daikon radish, pickled onions and a mint yogurt dressing. The coutremets paint a lively picture on your tongue in just the right proportion against the chiol backdrop.

The Goan crab cake (\$14) with chipotle sauce and a neat little cado salad didn't work for me. It was firmer and had more of a brittle texture than I like in a crab cake, but that's a matter of personal preference.

Roasted eggplant wrap (\$5) takes on a fresh identity with addition of caramelized onions, lentro and a chipotle dressing that has only a little edge to it.

If the mango soup seems more like dessert, go with the red le soup (\$5) which is more savory pairs perfectly with a salad whether you try the shaved rice and orange sections (\$8) over rice clun in a tomato/orange vinaigrette or the avocado and mango (\$8) passion fruit vinaigrette. Sprung beans (\$9), another option are partnered with empire apple in a lemon/mint vinaigrette.

Desserts (\$8) are lovely. Ki Indian ice cream, rests lightly pistchio brittle for a crunchy contrast to a dark cherry compote. Warm carrot fudge goes with mond brittle, while red wine poached pears are stuffed with sins and walnuts to reach another dimension, accented by mascarpone cheese (there's that Italian fluence again.)

Sollicitous, well-informed service was the finishing touch for a lovely evening at Piquant. The food is sound like an acquired taste, but all you have to do is try it to be hooked. This is a memorable experience all the way around.

Cody Kendall can be reached at CodyDine@metacrawler.net.