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Let's Talk Dhaka

Although minimalist in appearance, Café Dhaka in Santa Clara offers maximum flavor and value.

By Cheryl Sternman Rule

CAFÉ DHAKA has a secret weapon, and his name is Mohammed Rahman. Rahman, a hardware engineer—cum—restaurateur, is bar-none the single most enthusiastic, eager-to-please restaurant owner I've encountered in Silicon Valley. And he's thoroughly versed in the history, preparation and cultural significance of every item on his menu.

All of this is fortunate because Café Dhaka could use a good pitchman. If the absence of cars in the parking lot doesn't scare you away, the stainless-steel buffet with its Styrofoam teacups and straight-from-the-rice-cooker-style service just might. But tuck away your dining snobbery for an hour. Open your mind to the thoughtfully prepared, highly nuanced cuisine of Bangladesh, Pakistan and India. And ask for Rahman. (On my third visit, he was absent. When I casually inquired if he was back in the kitchen, my server stepped aside and whipped out a cell phone. Five minutes later, he sailed through the front door, all smiles, ready to talk food.)

The lunch buffet doesn't look like much, but like the shy girl in the back of the class with the killer personality, first impressions belie the quality of what's in store. Each weekday for \$8.45 (\$10.99 on weekends)—a pittance, really, when you consider how much food you can eat—Café Dhaka offers multiple kinds of meat and fish, several vegetable dishes, basmati rice, naan, salad, fruit, dessert and tea. Some items are better than others, but there's more than enough to choose from, and I guarantee several dishes will tickle your fancy.

The big knobs of bony, gray mutton didn't bowl me over, but a sultry, coconut milk-bathed "cabbage special" and garlicky shaag (spinach) bhajee nearly made me swoon. Polau (basmati rice with caramelized onions, green chiles, milk and butter) was fragrant with cardamom and cinnamon, and a catfish curry offered moist hunks of meaty fillets.

On another visit, I heaped light and crisp cauliflower pakoras and perfectly fried eggplant rounds next to tender, mild obo (pumpkin) and curried fish kofta (delicately spiced spheres of ground tilapia and pollock). There wasn't much room on my plate for salad or fruit, but damn if I wasn't going to scarf down that hot, blissfully doughy naan.

The lunch buffet generally offers several forms of chicken (tandoori, biryani) and with good reason: these cooks know their way around a bird. If you order off the menu instead, choose the superb chicken roast (\$7.95). Marinated for hours in yogurt and spices, large, juicy chicken parts luxuriate in a pale gravy of yet more yogurt (a common refrain), mashed onion, garlic and ginger and a bevy of intoxicating spices. Red and green chiles add some heat, which, as with all the dishes, can be dialed up or down according to personal preference. Just let your server know.

Bread from South Asia is always terrific, and Café Dhaka offers an unusual take on the traditional, layered paratha. Mogli paratha (\$5.95) simulates a giant stuffed envelope packed with egg, chicken or beef, cilantro and green chiles. Deep-fried, it's more wontonlike than breadlike, but it's awfully good.



Photograph by Felipe Buitrago

Bountiful Buffet: The buffet at Café Dhaka features many culinary treats from Bangladesh, Pakistan and India.



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Kebabs are served in what, according to Rahman, is Pakistani-style: sizzling on a platter rather than skewered. Strips of beef in the sheek kebab (5.95) get a four-hour marinade before sliding into a tandoori oven. The meat emerges silky soft from its lengthy yogurt soak. Lime, red onion and cilantro add a splash of color to the near-uniform tawnyness of many of the dishes.

A word about mutton: At Café Dhaka, the term "mutton" refers to goat meat rather than sheep meat. This is an unusual usage, so it's important to keep it in mind. All of the meat is halal, meaning it's butchered in accordance with Islamic dietary laws.

Sweets are an important fixture here, and a refrigerator by the entryway holds several desserts for easing grabbing by those who need a Bangladeshi/Pakistani/Indian sugar fix. They are exceedingly rich and unabashedly sweet. Doi, a thick, milky yogurt concoction, tastes just like cheesecake filling.

Café Dhaka has a lot going for it—just realize that the décor is minimal (white walls, a few maps, plastic flowers) and the dishes relatively unadorned (you won't find froofy garnishes). But the food is real, inexpensive and lovingly, carefully prepared. Plus, you're unlikely to find a better bargain. Go elsewhere if you want to impress someone with bells and whistles. Come here if you want heartfelt cooking made by people who take great pride in their culinary roots.

Café Dhaka

Address: 3284 El Camino Real, Santa Clara

Phone: 408.985.1841

Hours: 11:30am–2:30pm, 5:30–10pm Tue–Thu; 11:30am–3pm, 5:30–11pm Fri; noon–3pm, 6–11pm Sat; and 6–10pm Sun.

Cuisine: Bangladeshi, Indian and Pakistani.

Price Range: Lunch buffet \$8.45 weekdays, \$10.99 weekends; menu items \$3.95–11.95.

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