

The Sydney Morning Herald

GOOD LIVING

Aki's

By Helen Greenwood
February 13, 2006

Indian cuisine that is as upmarket as the restaurant's waterside location.

Address

1/6 Cowper Wharf Rd, Woolloomooloo

Phone

(02) 93324600

Style

Restaurants

Cuisine

Indian

Hours

Lunch Sun-Fri, noon-3pm; dinner daily, 6-10pm.

Details

Licensed, Water Views, Outdoor Seating

Payment

Bankcard, Visa, AMEX, Cash, Mastercard

Price Guide

Entrees \$11.80-\$21.80; mains \$18.80-\$32.50;
desserts \$12.80-\$13.80



Aki's: sophisticated, subtle Indian food.
Photo: *Natalie Boog*

Woolloomooloo Wharf was once a working dock that loaded men off to war. Now it's loaded with expensive apartments, an uber-hip hotel, posh restaurants and million-dollar boats. There is a three-deck catamaran that could ride the high seas without spilling your martini. There's also a runabout that we joke is for the maid to fetch the groceries.

The landlubbers dining at the water's edge are as wannabe glamorous as the watercraft. Being Sydney, there are endless tanned shoulders, strappy tops and open-necked shirts.

The flash factor is more subdued at Aki's, though, where the crowd is comfortably dressed, mainly middle-aged and well-mannered. A wooden figure, like a door wallah, guards the entrance, which is framed by garlands. A silk hanging is on a wall, mirrors run along the top of the long kitchen and the chairs are high-backed and comfortable. The only questionable decorating decision is the fabric knotted around the balustrades on the mezzanine level.

Up here, a hot crimson banquette is topped with Indian musical instruments. There is also a small lounge and bar where you can sip a spicy tamarindia or cardapinha. A couple with a baby and a pram find refuge (when they leave, the tables are not put back into place, an oversight that makes the space look messy). But downstairs is where the action is.

Our table is in a corner of what used to be the "shore shed" or administration offices for the old wharf. Its teal and grey exterior is cottage-y compared with the industrial modern of the rest of the wharf.

Aki's owner, Kumar Mahadevan, was attracted to this precinct because he wants to prove there's more to the Indian eating experience than a quick bain-marie curry.

It's no easy matter. Australians regard the cuisine of the subcontinent as convenience food, not as one to be savoured or admired, certainly not one on which to spend a lot.

Mahadevan made headway at his Strathfield restaurant, Abhi's, which he opened 16 years ago and still owns. At Aki's, he has brought his commitment to sophisticated, subtle Indian food to the inner city.

Chicken morsels, minty and yoghurt-smooth, are the amuse-gueule. That's the first sign of Aki's haute cuisine aspirations. The second is the tempting wine list from which we choose a stunning Henschke pinot gris with enough aromatic fruit to withstand the onslaught of aromatic spices. These are at the heart of what is mostly a triumph of cooking.

To start, some "small plates". The sweet, delicate flesh in the crab podimas is fragrant with ginger and black mustard seed, heightened by the light acid of tomato and creaminess of coconut. The palak patta chaat, the

signature dish from Abhi's, is heavenly crisp and nutty and laced with cool yoghurt, tamarind and mint, and the warmth of date and chilli. We're let down by the namkeen squid - its spiced flour coating is soggy.

Still, it's the only wrong note in a symphony that follows. Railway goat curry, robust and tender, punchy with cardamom and coriander; lamb achari, falling apart and subtle with aniseed and nigella seed in a light, tomato-based sauce; duck mappas, tender with deep coconut and aromatic with garam masala; and, finally, quail porichadu, fried and lifted with lime and ginger, cassia and fennel.

One of our party remarks how much she loves the heady, startlingly bright pepper in the dishes. In fact, all the spices are zingy and fresh, reminding me how dead are the ones usually offered in packets in shops.

The peshwari naan with its pistachio and date filling knocks the socks off my three friends. We dip it into the lamb sauce again and again to enjoy the citrus tang playing against the fruity sweetness of the bread.

The service is jovial but can veer to vague: the platter of condiments, which arrived for the first courses, would have been removed for the mains had we not demurred. A second waiter is required when we ask about the sweet platter, all variations on the cooked milk theme.

Emotionally and technically, with its skilful sauces and intricate spicing, this is a cuisine as haute as anything the Chinese or the French deliver. Sydney is lucky to have someone who cares enough to provide it to us.

Out of 10

- | | |
|-------------------|---|
| Food | 9
Emotionally and technically, this is haute Indian cuisine that deserves accolades and acolytes. |
| Service | 7
The waiters are available and jovial but not always as attentive to detail as the kitchen staff. |
| Atmosphere | 8
Good looking and colourful without being gaudy. The bonus is you can hear yourself and your companions. |
| Value | 8
About \$50 a head, including side dishes; great value for great cooking. |