
How about a little taste of Sri Lanka? (Hint: It's not Indian)

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by Peter Genovese/The Star-Ledger Tanya and Sumith De Silva had two good reasons for opening Sigiri on Route 27 in Edison. One, Sigiri, which may be the state's only Sri Lankan restaurant, is a short drive from Little India, the stretch of Indian restaurants, markets and stores on Oak Tree Road in Edison. Two, the corporate office of SriLankan Airlines is even closer, by the Metropark train station. "I work for my wife, so she can always find me," Sumith De Silva said, laughing. Actually, the two, both native Sri Lankans, own the Edison restaurant, while Sumith De Silva and a partner own a Sigiri in New York City. Sigiri is named after Sigiriya, a famed rock fortress/castle ruin in central Sri Lanka. "It is difficult to explain to people what is Sri Lankan food," Sumith De Silva said. "Many think it is Indian food. The best way I can explain it is a cross between southern Indian and Thai food." Sri Lankan and Indian food employ the same lineup of spices -- cardamom, cumin, coriander, cloves, ginger and more -- but in different mixtures and grinds. "We may roast half (the spices) and not roast the rest," De Silva said. "Then we mix that up. It all means a different taste." The menu asks patrons to specify their "spice level" -- mild, medium, spicy or very spicy. I tried several "very spicy" dishes and didn't require medical assistance; your threshold may be different. The menu includes curries, soups, stews, rice specialties and deviled grill specialties, shorthand here for spicy grilled dishes. The deviled grilled prawn (\$12), studded with prawn, green and red peppers, tomatoes and onions, practically breathes fire, and is bewitching besides. The chicken curry (\$7) lacks spicy substance, but the fish curry (\$8) is a winning combination of tender kingfish and rich, satisfying stew. The Sri Lankan crab curry (\$12) is the meal that can be eaten as a soup, without rice, or a curry dish, with it. It's tasty either way. My three dining companions -- Alison, Brooke and Brian -- weren't crazy about the beef stew (\$10), but I found myself taking seconds, and thirds. The pol (coconut) roti didn't seem especially coconutty, but I liked its thick, puffy heft. Another Sri Lankan staple is string hopper -- strings of rice-flour dough squeezed through a sieve and then steamed. The chicken version (\$10.50) was a group favorite. "A balance of sweet and spicy," Brian said. The chicken lamprais -- rice, chicken and vegetables wrapped in a banana leaf and baked in the oven (\$12), makes for good dining theater -- and an even better meal. Liked the chicken mullagathany (\$4.50), also known as mulligatawny. Didn't like the vegetable soup (\$4). One other disappointment: the fish rolls (\$1.25 each). Best item sampled? The lamb black curry (\$10), at least the spicy version, takes no prisoners. It is peppery to the max, with juicy, tender meat. One whiff, and you'll be transported to the Spice Island. Call it the best takeout dish I've had this year. Other items include fish stew (\$11), dry fish curry (\$9), mixed fried rice (with chicken, beef, shrimp and vegetables, \$10.50) and assorted Sri Lankan desserts. "What we are trying to do," Sumith De Silva said, "is introduce Sri Lankan food to the locals." A cross between southern Indian and Thai? I'd call Sri Lankan food, and Sigiri, an eye-opening, spice-filled, sensory experience. Courtesy: nj.com