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## Spice Route Asian Bistro & Bar

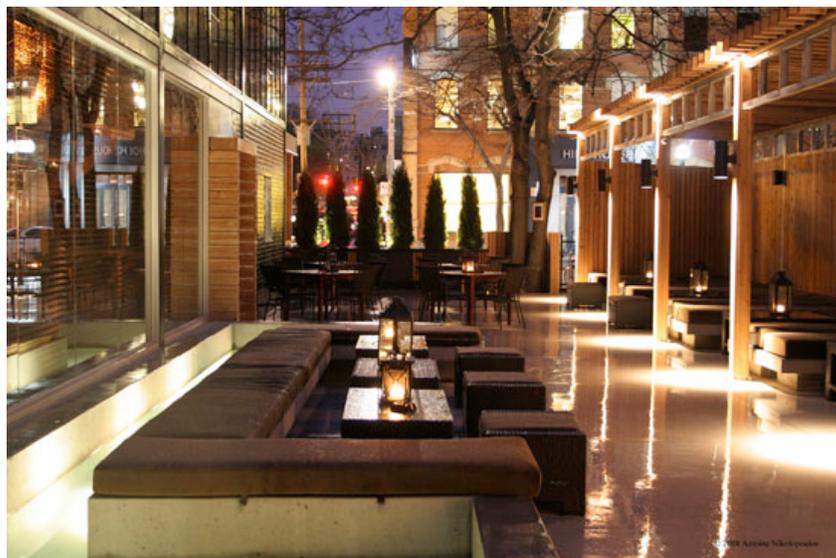
Asian Restaurant



 For inquiries or reservations call: **(647) 977-6416**

## A destination unto itself

By Marie Nicola  
June 18, 2008



Like the characters in Alice Through the Looking Glass, patrons passing through the heavy antique doors of Spice Route enter a space vast enough to be considered another land. Born of the visionary duo that is Charles Khabouth and Nick Di Donato, Spice Route brings together Project Creative Director, Nadia Di Donato, Executive Chef Winlai Wong and artist Douglas MacRae to create an exotic world of zen aesthetics and Indo-Chinese cuisine.

"It's hard to imagine the scope of the project while it is in the planning phases... There's no where else like it in Toronto" revealed



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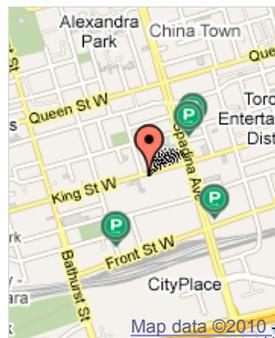
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**OPERATING HOURS**

MONDAY  
11:30am-1:00am  
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WEDNESDAY  
11:30am-1:00am  
THURSDAY  
11:30am-2:00am  
FRIDAY  
11:30am-2:00am  
SATURDAY  
5:00pm-2:00am

more see into it in Toronto, featured Executive Chef Winlai Wong as we stood in the doorway between two giant standing Buddha statues. Taking a moment to overlook the dining room, we appreciate the fire and water design theme, complete with central bar surrounding a 16-foot waterfall. For the most part, it's hard not to agree.

While it is a typical crowd of suited, young urban professionals that flock there for Thursday post-work aperitifs, the quieter Monday to Wednesday nights are recommended to truly appreciate the diversity of the space. Large banquette booths, inside and out on the patio, were obviously built to host feasting groups as well as couples.

Each area of Spice Route has its own identity. The spiritual interior includes the "Harem Room" complete with a massive, rose-petal enclosed table, Douglas MacRae's hand-painted murals that line the perimeter and a constant rotation of live DJs, enclosed above in their own lookout. Outside, the 2,000 sq.ft. patio is finished with a koi pond, giant semi-private areas and beautiful private bar. However, the surprising piece de resistance comes from the stunning washrooms featuring one-way windows overlooking a private courtyard complete with water fountains.

Of course, decor notwithstanding, it is simply another bar without the element that provides the "bistro".

The robust menu consists of 70 generously portioned shared plates, making dining an enjoyable and tangible experience. "It is a labour of love," describes Chef Wong, "All of the dishes are made here, on site... the dumplings are shaped by hand and all the sauces are made in house and are reminiscent of foods from my youth."

While each dish is as delicious as the next, Chef Wong encourages that it should not be considered "fine dining." However, it is abundantly clear from the appetizers that begin appearing on our table, that there is something to be said about traditional dishes executed very, very well.

The crisp and tender tempura calamari and rock shrimp (\$14) are unconventionally delicious, yet are easily overshadowed by the popular trio of mild, yet crunchy, wasabi-crusting shrimp (\$11), which quickly ascends to iconic status. Although I personally enjoyed the addictive spiced chicken and Peking duck lettuce wraps (\$12), as well as the thinly sliced New York strip steak marinated and cooked on a hot rock presentation (\$14). The interactive experience of assembling both dishes were akin to alchemy; the freshness of the ingredients paired with the Indo-Chinese aromas instantly registered in our minds. The only appropriate response was to indulge in second helpings, regardless of the next wave of dishes.

Inevitably, when dishes are this enjoyable, one cannot help but to "make room."

Sampling from our own personal buffet complete with plates of sizzling Mandarin fried rice with barbeque pork and sweet peas (\$12), wok-fried garlic baby bok choy (\$6) and braised mushrooms and snow peas in oyster sauce (\$8), it is impossible to disguise our delight in the rediscovery of elegant Asian flavours elevated through the expert tutelage of Wong's father, master wok chef Manfred Wong.



SUNDAY  
12:00pm-10:00pm

\*Hours may change during holidays or special occasions. Always contact the establishment for specific information.

"Yes, my father guided me through the preparation of the traditional wok items," Chef Wong proudly states. She also shares the kitchen with her husband and Spice Route's Executive Sous Chef, Sam Chao: "... he's from Burma, so he is well familiarized with the use of Asian spices, particularly Indian, Thai and Korean."

No where else is there a better example of the innate application of aromatic spices than with the deftly prepared Indian-spiced roast chicken (\$20). The beckoning scents of turmeric are an alluring overture to the roasted meat that falls away, as if on command. Succulent Vietnamese rack of lamb (\$25) waits to be dipped in a lemongrass marinade before it too abandons the bone. By far, the roast chicken and lamb are two standout entrees that must be sampled. However, the more subtle miso-glazed black cod (\$23) is mildly flavoured and expertly prepared as the morsels of fork-tender fish surrender to the tongue.

Ingenuity abound not only in the kitchen, but with the cocktails from the bar as well. Unique cold and hot spiked teas (\$7) combine the delicate flavours of tea with liqueurs, and pair ideally with dessert moreso than a conventional cup of coffee might. Refreshing pomegranate cold spiked tea (black cherry vodka, chambord) should be a summertime patio staple, while the chai spiked hot tea (Tequila rose, Grand Marinier) is as comforting as the mango and apple dragon rolls (\$6). This dessert is an advanced interpretation of apple pie that relies on the natural sweetness of the fruit contained within a crunchy, thinly wrapped shell.

However, the white chocolate cheesecake lollipop was the one dessert to rule them all. Converting a self-professed cheesecake hater upon the first cracking of the thin coconut-crusted white chocolate shell revealing the discovery of a rich cheesecake center, this dessert was an exercise in pure decadence.

From the inspiration of the Far East to the well tempered plates of Toronto, Spice Route is gluttony for the senses. A relaxed ambiance invites patrons to indulge religiously over authentic Indo-Chinese cuisine while the affordable pricing is an attractive feature allowing younger twenty-somethings to revel alongside suited businessmen and established foodies.

Yes, unity in opulence will soon be the reputation of Spice Route, transporting diners on a spiritual journey to lands of spice and tradition.