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LONG ISLAND DINING | NEW HYDE PARK

Exotic and Familiar At an Afghan Grill

By JOANNE STARKEY

WE were on our way to the Afghan Grill Kabob House in New Hyde Park when one of our party admitted that he knew nothing about Afghan food and was worried about whether he would like it. In fact, anyone who likes Greek or Turkish cooking will find similar dishes here: grilled meats, kebabs, hummus, lots of eggplant and chopped salads. Yet there is enough exotic fare to make a meal exciting, and the food is delicious.

The staff at this three-year-old restaurant, in a spacious storefront, goes out of its way to make diners feel comfortable. One night the smiling waiter-host described the menu in detail, explaining that the three sauces he brought to the table were yogurt, cilantro and hot sauce. On a second visit we had a motherly waitress who noticed that one of us was not eating rice and

asked whether anything was wrong. When we assured her that the diner in question simply didn't like rice, she promised to substitute grilled vegetables or a more substantial salad next time.

Though the tables in the two attractive dining rooms are topped with cloths, napkins are paper. You won't care about that when you see the prices. Half the entrees, each with basmati rice and a small but crunchy-fresh green salad, are under \$12. There are also wonderful deals for two, four or six people. The dinner for two, for example, is \$26.95 and offers a choice of two kebabs and one stew — essentially three entrees for the price of two.

The warm pita-style bread here is much thinner and lighter than the Greek variety. Order the warm eggplant dip to go with it. (Butter is provided.) Three other appetizers that should not be missed are the sambosas (fried meat

and vegetable filled turnovers, served with a cilantro dipping sauce), manto (silken dumplings stuffed with ground meat) and aushak (equally light pasta pockets filled with chopped scallions). Both pasta offerings were topped with yogurt sauce.

We also liked the à la carte shirazi salad of diced tomatoes, cucumber, onions and lots of parsley. (The menu mentioned feta cheese but ours had none.)

The charcoal broiled lamb chops, the most expensive entree on the menu, at \$18.95, had been marinated and were as tasty as they were tender. Among the kebabs, the traditional shish kebab of tender marinated lamb was terrific.

Less familiar picks were zereshk pallow, juicy chunks of Cornish hen (kebab style) served over basmati rice topped with berries and raisins. A bowl of spicy meatballs in gravy also made the grade, as did the tender lamb shank atop a mountain of rice. The entree I'd go back for is the eggplant stew, which should really be called lamb stew with eggplant, tomatoes and onions: The tender meat should be given top billing.

Only two desserts were offered on the nights of our visits. One was a moist, not-too-sweet baklava, the other an unusual, delicious homemade ice cream flavored with both vanilla and saffron.

When a diner at our table ordered coffee, our waiter said, "Our tea is better." She took his suggestion and was happy with the result. In fact, we were happy with nearly everything at this agreeable restaurant.

Afghan Grill Kabob House

1629 Hillside Avenue
New Hyde Park
(516) 998-4084

WORTH IT

THE SPACE Spacious storefront with two high-ceilinged rooms. Wheelchair accessible.

THE CROWD Casual couples and small groups, including children. The staff is warm and welcoming.

THE BAR No alcohol is served. Diners may bring their own wine.

THE BILL Lunch entrees, \$7.95 to \$17.95.

Dinner entrees, \$10.95 to \$18.95. Dinners for two (\$26.95) four (\$54.95) or six (\$74.95) include extra dishes. The food is a bargain. American Express, Visa, MasterCard and Discover are accepted.

WHAT WE LIKED Eggplant dip, sambosas, manto, aushak, lamb chops, lamb shish kebab, zereshk pallow, lamb shank, meatballs in gravy, eggplant stew, baklava, saffron-flecked homemade ice cream.

IF YOU GO Open Monday through Thursday, 11:30 a.m. to 10 p.m.; Friday, 11:30 a.m. to 11 p.m.; Saturday, 1 to 11 p.m.; and Sunday, 1 to 10 p.m. Reservations are suggested on the weekends.

RATINGS Metropolitan has changed its rating system to: Don't Miss, Worth It, In a Pinch, and Don't Bother