

Eating Out: Chakra in Paramus

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Chakra, a word inspired by the ancient yoga systems of India, refers to spinning vortices of energy in the body. It is believed that the seven chakras form a profound combination linking the physical, emotional, mental and spiritual selves into one invisible whole.

While the cloverleaf of Routes 4 and 17 certainly conjures images of spinning vortices - romantic rendezvous and sophisticated culinary experiences are not what comes to mind.

But pass through the doors of West 144 Route 4 east, and the Garden State real estate gives way to an exotic mélange of Manhattan and South Beach - a seductive culinary environment conducive to exploration, escape and discovery.

Less than one year old, the cavernous single-room, 187-seat restaurant oozes mystery and sophistication. Softly lit with hundreds of candles, the dining room creates magical sensory overload enhanced with a water wall of constantly changing colors. Trees and ferns, velvet pillow-backed banquettes, hindu bas-relief, Asian throw rugs and silk-tented bungalows immerse the diner in an extraordinary environment.

But there is a darker side - literally. I can only ask why Chakra is so dim that it casts the world into near darkness. And why the servers are dressed head-to-toe in black like so many gastronomic ninjas, presenting diners with cumbersome metal-covered menus. Couldn't the ceiling, studded with a galaxy of stars, also be soundproofed?

Enough grousing about such a lovely place, where each visit was

highlighted by a delightful amuse bouche. One night the chef sent out a bit of duck confit, drizzled with cilantro-infused oil - a mouthful of intense flavor to set the tone for the culinary delights ahead.

The creative menu offers an appetizing array of selections ranging from oyster tastings to bluefin tuna prepared three ways, homemade pappardelle, and entrees including pan-roasted Long Island duck and Black Angus strip steak.

palate with every sip.

I am not a devotee of calamari (\$9), but Chakra's absolutely tender, yielding and well-dressed fried calamari prepared with a hint of lemon basil is as good as it gets. No bowl of pedestrian marinara accompanied. Instead, a thick and rich aioli with confetti of tomatoes was offered for dipping.

An appetizer of five jumbo coconut-crusted shrimp (\$10) swam in a sultry mango cilantro sauce. This lovely

greens was refreshing and exceptional. The mild vinaigrette delicately clung to the leaves like dew. But the small medallion of warm macadamia-crusted goat cheese was hard to detect despite its star billing.

Executive chef Edward Lake, formerly executive chef at the United Nations, is to be commended for the tantalizing way he fuses Asian and American elements in every selection from appetizer to dessert.

A perfect example was the pan-seared fillet of skate (\$26). Here he used a generous bundle of tender white asparagus to frame spring garlic foam - a reduction of white wine and sugar, boiled garlic and warm champagne. The skate was placed on a pedestal of fire-roasted caponata, the Sicilian relish composed of raisin, capers, cilantro, eggplant and red pepper. The sweet caponata formed a perfect savory contrapuntal for the smooth asparagus and mellow fish.

Pastas, most house-made, are carefully presented and beautifully crafted. Ravioli of Maryland crabmeat (\$19) is made with an abundance of crab, but avocado and leeks are also in the shallow pool of Brut Imperial Champagne sauce. The dish is simply exquisite.

Sage-grilled skirt steak (\$23), served with herbed railroad fries and a western grilled cactus salad, was a joy. The thin steak was stacked like a hand of solitaire, revealing a red center beneath perfectly seared exterior. Dressed with a roasted shallot sauce, the steak paired well with its accompaniments.

Be warned: Desserts will seduce. But they are so delicious you will have no regrets. We found rapture in a napoleon of goat cheese with fresh raspberries (\$12) that is as bold, colorful and memorable as the restaurant itself.

Chakra

West 144 Route 4 east
Paramus • (201) 556-1530

Prices: Appetizers \$8-\$32 (for two); pastas \$16 to \$19; entrées \$19 to \$34.

Recommended dishes: Coconut-crusted shrimp, short ribs, roasted pear salad.

Liquor, wine: Yes.

Wine list: Excellent

Service: Professional and efficient.

Setting: Soho meets South Beach in Delhi.

Noise level: Moderate to high.

Credit cards: AE, D, MC, V.

Reservations: Recommended weeknights, required on weekend.

Days closed: None.

Smoking: Bar area only.

Accommodations for children: Menu.

Dress: Business casual.

Lunch: Yes.

Early bird service: No.

Takeout: No.

Parking: Valet.

Web site: chakrarestaurant.com

Rated by The Record: October 15, 2004.

★★★★1/2

- Contemporary American
- Elegant
- Very Expensive

● Poor

★ Fair

★★ Good

★★★ Excellent

★★★★ Outstanding

In determining ratings, each restaurant has been compared with others of the same type and level of ambition. Restaurants are rated on the quality of their food, atmosphere, service, and value. Halves are given when a restaurant surpasses a level in food, service, or ambience.

Reviewers make at least two anonymous visits to a restaurant, and The Record always pays the tab.

Cost guide: A dinner for two without alcohol but including three courses, tax, and a 15% tip totaling \$40 or less is inexpensive; \$41 to \$70, moderate; \$71 to \$130, expensive; more than \$130, very expensive.

The soup of the day at one visit was gazpacho (\$6). The chef added a hint of the exotic by including mango and pineapple along with more traditional cilantro, cucumber, red onion and green and red peppers. The result was a cool wave moderated with "heat" from spices slowly building on the

sauce delivered a sweet kiss from the tropical fruit, followed by a bright sting from nearly invisible red pepper flakes. The only appetizer that didn't live up to expectations was the goat cheese salad (\$10). A mountain of fresh baby radicchio, Faurot Ranch organic watercress, frisée and other