



NEW JERSEY

## An Ambient Route to Spice (and Henna)

By DAVID CORCORAN  
 Published: October 7, 2007

HEADQUARTERS PLAZA is a 1980s urban-renewal project that probably seemed like a good idea at the time but now feels seriously out of place — four blank-faced commercial high-rises plunked down on a 19th-century streetscape that badly wants trees and steeples, galleries and coffee shops. Enter one of the echoing marble lobbies and you're no longer in gracious old Morristown; you could be in any anonymous office-and-hotel compound off any exit ramp in America.

### In the Region

Long Island, Westchester, Connecticut and New Jersey

[Go to Complete Coverage »](#)

So when the Edison-based Mehtani Restaurant Group conceived a \$4 million plan to put two restaurants and a nightclub in a wing of the plaza that once held a Bennigan's, the first problem was: How to make them inviting? The solution, developed by a team led by Shaun Mehtani, the 23-year-old managing partner (and son of the restaurant group's founders), was ingenious.

To enter the restaurant complex, whether from the outdoor plaza or from the lobby atop the underground parking garage, you have to pass through one of two tunnel-like corridors. Each is lined with mahogany punctuated by lighted display cases holding exquisite little vases, statues and other Indian artifacts. The effect is transporting: you're no longer in Headquarters Plaza, but in what could be called Mehtaniland.

And then when you're escorted from the circular reception area into the restaurant Mehndi (its partners are Ming II, a casual pan-Asian place, and SM23, a nightclub), you're transported yet again. Mehndi is a beautiful space, a two-level grotto divided by a mahogany case containing dozens more artifacts. There are no windows, and the lighting is so dim you may need night-vision goggles to read the menu, but the mood is preternaturally relaxing.

In such surroundings, the food could easily prove a letdown. It does not. The kitchen, led by Mohammed Ansari, delivers Punjabi and Mughlai cuisine, from the north of India. While the cooking hits few creative heights, it is careful, consistent and even stylish.

Snack-food appetizers — deep-fried pakoras, the triangular wraps called samosas, the crisp papadum wafers topped with vegetables — all carried a heady blend of spices. Sheekh kebab, or skewered ground lamb, had a potent overlay of garlic and hot pepper.

Best of all was sundal, which our waitress all but commanded us to order: a steaming crock filled with baked chickpeas infused with ginger and mustard seed and topped with chopped mango and grated coconut.

A variety of breads were disappointingly alike, and more chewy than ethereal. But the main courses were largely terrific. Two tandoori dishes, lamb chops and subz (assorted vegetables), had the mouth-filling tart-smoky character that comes from long marination in spiced yogurt followed by a visit to an 850-degree clay oven.

Casseroles were well executed and potently spiced: baingan bharta, or mashed eggplant with tomatoes, garlic and fragrant cardamom pods; saag gosht, flavorful lamb on a bed of spinach; and jinga masala, perfectly roasted jumbo shrimp in a tomato-and-ginger sauce. Or you might try the fabulous parda biryani, in which bony but tender cubes of goat are baked with rice under a thin pastry crust that acts, in effect, like the lid of a steamer. The technique infuses everything with deep, penetrating spices — saffron, cinnamon, clove, mint, green chili and cilantro — and the dish almost roars with flavor.

The word Mehndi means the application of henna, the dye used in the temporary tattoos that are an [art](#) form in Indian and Middle Eastern communities, and the restaurant is as good as its word. On Friday and Saturday nights, a henna artist holds court, painting elaborate designs on the hand or ankle of all comers. It's free, though tips are welcome. The artist is Hina Mehta, and she and her work are a lot like this fine eight-month-old restaurant: skillful, elegant, and very much worth a visit.

### Mehndi

88 Headquarters Plaza

3 Speedwell Avenue (Route 202)

Morristown

(973) 871-2323

[www.mehtanirestaurantgroup.com](http://www.mehtanirestaurantgroup.com)

### VERY GOOD

**THE SPACE** A comfortable, dimly lighted, beautifully decorated two-level dining room with 130 seats. The lower level and restrooms are wheelchair-accessible.

**THE CROWD** A bit more casual than the ambience, with many families and small children.

**THE STAFF** Welcoming and attentive, though prone to occasional confusion. Delays between courses can be long.

**THE BAR** A decent and fairly priced selection of [wines](#) (but no Indian beers), and a long list of cocktails supplied by the lounge next door.

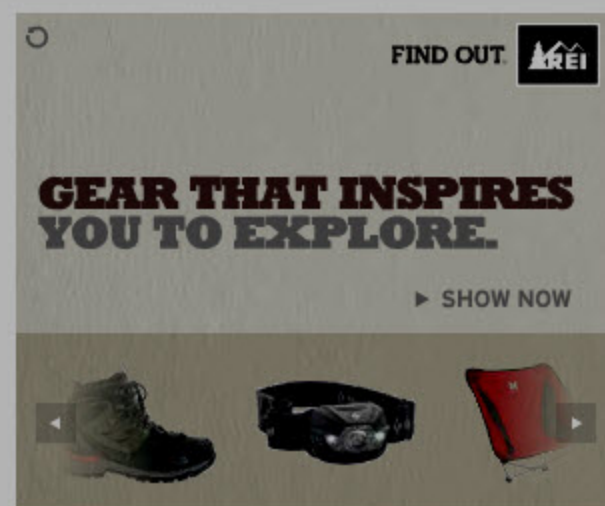
**THE BILL** Lunch buffet, \$13. Dinner entrees, \$13 to \$29. Credit cards: American Express, MasterCard, Visa.

**WHAT WE LIKE** Pakoras, samosas, papadum, sheekh kebab, sundal; tandoori lamb chops, tandoori vegetables, saag gosht, jinga masala, baingan bharta, parda biryani; fig ice cream.

**IF YOU GO** Closed Monday. Lunch: Tuesday to Friday, 11:30 a.m. to 2:30 p.m.; Saturday and Sunday, noon to 3 p.m. Dinner: Sunday and Tuesday to Thursday, 5:30 to 10 p.m.; Friday and Saturday, 5:30 to 11 p.m. Reservations recommended. Street parking is limited; underground parking is free with validation by the restaurant.

Reviewed Oct. 7, 2007

More Articles in New York Region »



### MOST POPULAR

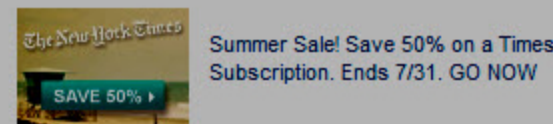
E-MAILED BLOGGED SEARCHED VIEWED

1. Maureen Dowd: Hiding in Plain Sight
2. The Pour: Wine's Sweet Spot Is a \$20 Bill
3. Well: The 10-Minute Workout, Times Three
4. Mark Bittman: More on Milk
5. State of the Art: The Payout in an Apple Upgrade
6. Opinion: Our Ridiculous Approach to Retirement
7. Memorable Bottles for \$20
8. Mogul's Latest Foray Courts Jews for the G.O.P.
9. Virginia Developer Is on a Mission to Revive His Town
10. The Getaway: 10 Paths to a More Fluent Vacation

[Go to Complete List »](#)



### ADVERTISEMENTS



Ads by Google what's this?

### Beach Homes from \$200k's

Gorgeous New Homes Ocean View DE  
 First-Class Amenities Near Bethany  
[www.bayforestbeach.com](http://www.bayforestbeach.com)