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Is Mavalli Tiffin Rooms the best South Indian restaurant in the world?

Perfect dosas woo the crowds at Mavalli Tiffin Rooms -- but some say it's just a load of hype

By Olivia Greenway 11 September, 2012

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Diners wait up to an hour for rava idlis at Mavalli Tiffin Rooms in Bangalore.

I'm in the waiting hall of the Mavalli Tiffin Rooms, or MTR, as it is commonly known.

Sitting on a hard wooden bench under ceiling fans, I'm reminded of train stations in old black-and-white movies.

Why would anyone want to go to a restaurant where you have to wait for up to an hour before you can get a seat in the dining room?

There is a no reservations policy and you pay for your meal -- usually no more than a mere Rs 150 (US\$3) per head -- before eating. Mavalli Tiffin Rooms feels like an overcrowded cafeteria.

And yet, more than 1,500 customers visit each day for a taste of South Indian cooking.

What has made this place so good for so long?

Little has changed since this vegetarian venture first opened its doors in Bangalore in 1924. The decor is decidedly tired -- faded curtains and scruffy walls, plain tables with red plastic garden chairs.

Even the waitstaff look like they are from another era, dressed in shirts and loincloths and walking barefoot.

Mavalli Tiffin Rooms is now in the hands of the third-generation owners, Hemamalini Maiya and her two brothers.

Hemamalini gave up a promising career in engineering to take over the family business in 1999 when her father fell ill. She maintains that MTR is successful exactly because it has not tried to reinvent itself.

"We still roast our own coffee beans every day and there is no menu," she says. "People trust us and our food is simple but good. We are an institution."



As my name is finally called in MTR's waiting hall, I am about to test her theory.

Also on CNN: [World's first vegetarian McDonald's to open at Indian holy sites](#)

Rather than spend ages queuing, arrive at the tail end of a service session when other diners will leave.

<http://www.cnn.com/mumbai/life/worlds-first-vegetarian-mcdonalds-open-indian-holy-sites-895961>

Breaking dosa

I am here for breakfast and I'm served rava idli, which Mavalli Tiffin Rooms claims it invented. The soft steamed bread is made from semolina instead of the usual rice flour, a recipe that dates back to grain shortages during World War II.

The idli arrives with coconut chutney, a spicy sambar and a vada, which is a delicious savory donut made from lentils.

For me, the pièce de résistance for me is the masala dosa, freshly made, steaming hot, straight from the kitchen. A small bowl of ghee is available to pour over your dosa if you need a coronary overload.

Rather like a stiff pancake, but made from rice flour, the crust of the dosa is crisp, melt-in-the-mouth and has a pleasant caramel-like aftertaste. The center is filled with seasoned potato and onion. It is perfect.

So what is the real secret of its recipe?

Hemamalini tells me they maintain the quality of the food by being consistent. Each of the 15 chefs is given charge of just one food item. She prefers to train chefs in-house and many start off with no cooking skills.



The MTR dosa that has made addicts out of thousands.

"All our food is freshly made every day. Any leftover food is given to charity."

I spoke to a couple of regulars tucking into their food. Ratan Lunia, 60, has been eating at Mavalli Tiffin Rooms all his life. His father brought him and now he brings his own family.

Sohan Moses is also dining with his wife and son. He says he visits perhaps once every month or so. It's a long trek through the notorious Bangalore traffic to get here, otherwise he would visit more often.

Editor's note: An earlier version of this story incorrectly stated that the restaurant has rooms reserved for regulars. Thanks for catching the error, Arv!

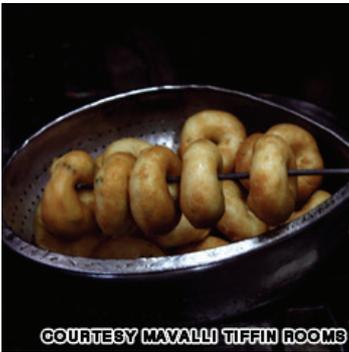
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Hygiene and hype

I finish my meal with the signature silver cup of coffee, scalding hot. I've now overstayed my welcome and the restaurant is already being cleaned for the next session.

Soapy water is thrown over the floor and the tables are scrubbed. Late diners have to leave through the kitchen as the front door is locked.

Sidestepping soapsuds, I think to myself that this is a clever ploy to demonstrate how clean the kitchens are. In the past, customers had to enter Mavalli Tiffin Rooms via the kitchen to see just how hygienic it was.



Super crunchy vadas: the breakfast donut, desi-style.

Despite its great food and pride in cleanliness, MTR has plenty of local detractors.

Swati Bakshi, 40, has lived in Bangalore most of his life.

"In the last few years, the place has started to look very run down," he says. "The staff could do with being more courteous."

Rohit Biddappa, a native of Karnataka, agrees. "It's over-hyped," he says and reels off five places he regards as better.

Yet some claim this is the best Indian restaurant in the world.

If a restaurant is judged by its food alone, then a clutch of award certificates on the wall -- the most recent being "Best Karnataka Food" by The Times of India in January 2012 -- gives the claim some credibility.

14 Lalbagh Road, Bangalore; +91 80 2222 0022; open Tuesday-Sunday. See website for opening times. To avoid long waits, visit on weekdays towards the end of a service session. www.mavallitiffinrooms.com (<http://www.mavallitiffinrooms.com>)

Have you eaten at Mavalli Tiffin Rooms? Do you think it lives up to the hype? Where can you get better dosas than the ones at MTR?



Frothy coffee, much needed to combat carb coma.



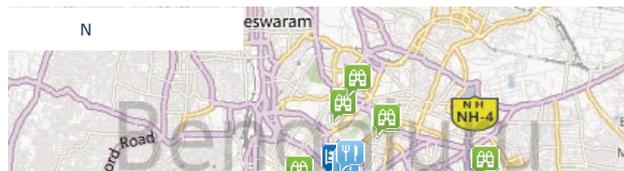
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