



# EATING ETHNIC INDY ADVENTURES ON THE CITY'S CULINARY HIGH SEAS

BY TERRY KIRTS

In examining recent culinary headlines, Indy diners could certainly find a lot to frown about. The demise early last year of Peter George's trio of headline-making restaurants left a void in the Indy culinary scene that some feared couldn't soon be filled. To make matters worse, the last two months have seen devastating closures — Tony Hanslitts' Tavola di Tosa and Café Euro Tosa, Casey Uglow's The Pidge in Zionsville, and Patrick Aasen's Arturo's have all closed, taking with them some of the most original food in town, as well as much-loved neighborhood hot spots. Despite the economic upswing, times are clearly still a little rocky for the most innovative of gourmet eateries.

All the while, a new breed of market-savvy, high-end chain restaurants has commandeered space in just about every quadrant of the city, demanding the lion's share of Indy's diners — and dining dollars. Hardly a storefront on East 86th Street lies vacant a month or two before another chain eats it up. And some of the very same restaurants with the very same menus are sprouting in former farmlands on Indy's sprawling Southside. Blame these restaurants, if you will, for the demise of beloved independents, but applaud them, at least, for offering a fresher and more interesting product to their customers.

## TRY AND KEEP UP WITH THE "COMING SOON" SIGNS

Increasingly, however, the news in Indy's culinary scene isn't happening at the top or in the limelight. Often, it doesn't even make the press at all. Even word of mouth can't keep up with all of the new neighborhood eateries, strip-mall grand openings and "Coming Soon" signs. But drive up Lafayette Road, as I did one balmy late-winter Sunday, and you'll quickly find yourself passing an impressive array of small, colorful storefront restaurants, as well as a couple of stellar Asian grocery stores where jade-green heads of bok choy glow in coolers, duck eggs ruminat and the eyes of glistening fish peer up at you from banks of crushed ice. Stop in at a few, and you'll understand just how diverse this city's culinary palate is.

## ETHNIC EATERIES RESTORE VITALITY

Is it that ethnic populations tend to hover at the city's edges or is it merely that these daring restauranteurs seek out the inexpensive space in strip-malls for their upstart cafés and take-outs? Whatever the case, these new ethnic eateries have helped to restore a vitality to some formerly vacated or run-down sections that even forward-thinking urban planning couldn't bring about. Maybe they don't bear the striped awnings and tidy welcome mats of neighborhood eateries from decades ago, but they're rich with aromas and filled with spirited crowds that raise a variety of accents and inflections underscoring the kind of cosmopolitan city that Indianapolis is becoming.



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The past year has also marked some stellar openings as well as some very notable expansions and exciting changes.

Closer to the city's center, some good things are afoot as well. Now that the main drags of Broad Ripple are nearly saturated with shops and restaurants, everything from beloved India Garden and Shalimar to the more recent Ripple Bagel & Deli and Dick's Bodacious Barbecue, new places have sprung up on the neighborhood's periphery. Sam's Gyros (5404 N. College, 251-8503), tucked between Brookes Surplus Store and Northside News, is a sixtable affair where Sam himself stands at the counter and claims his gyros and falafel are the best in town. He might just be right.

Following on the heels of Rob 'n' Jay's Chippy (5168 N. College Ave. 927-1995) that's drawing more diners (and soccer fans) to its true blue British pub offerings (including curry fries and mushy peas), the entire northwest end of the 5100 block of College is composed of eateries and pubs. Oasis Restaurant (5166 N. College Ave., 283-0000) has, in the past few weeks, added another very palatable choice in a widening array of Greek and Middle Eastern restaurants. Hummus comes with plenty of earthy tahini, tabouli shimmers a deep green with tons of parsley and entrees are accompanied by a generous ramekin overfilled with briny olives and sticks of garlicky pickled turnip. **Next door, a somewhat mysterious renovation sports a sign with delectable suggestions of artisanal cheeses and weekend brunches in a café and marketplace to be called, simply, Taste. Along with its neighbors, Taste promises to make that end of the block a welcome culinary corner as just up the street Atlas grocery store, formerly Indy's shrine to all things gourmet, sits month after month in consternating, inexplicable vacancy.**