

# The Search for ...



BY LINDA GARSON



**B**UTTER CHICKEN IS A MUCH-LOVED DISH the world over, and it turns out never more so than in Calgary!

Its roots lie in Delhi in 1948, the very early days of the famous Moti Mahal restaurant, where they needed to find a way of using leftover tandoori chicken which can become dry without any sauce, so the chef made a gravy of tomatoes, butter and cream that he had to hand, along with some spices to jazz

it up a little.

Also known as Murgh Makhani from the Punjabi (literally chicken [with] butter) or Chicken Makhani, you may also find this delicious sauce as Butter Prawns, Paneer Makhani (with white cheese), and Dal Makhani with lentils and beans.

Butter Chicken isn't a million miles away from the British national dish for the last 10 years, Chicken Tikka Masala, but that is a British invention –

less sweet, less creamy, and with more tomato intensity.

In collaboration with Alberta Milk, we set out to find out how Calgary fared in the world of butter chicken – and embarked upon an amazing, pants-stretching adventure! We asked our readers and our followers on social media and television to nominate your favourite butter chicken in Calgary, and we were astounded at the response; we counted nearly 50 restaurants, cafés,

pubs, and take-outs, on your list of must-try places!

We couldn't do this alone, so we engaged three local experts to judge too: Karen Anderson of Alberta Food Tours; avid food blogger, Fahreen Rattani Remtulla; and Chef Guru Singh, owner of GzooH ghost kitchens.

"I had a bias going into this contest on what butter chicken should taste like. But I opened my palate and tasted each dish on its own merit. In the end, I came to love the ones that achieved balance between tomatoes and cream, and that slipped in a little more heat or an accent on a different spice like saffron, black pepper, turmeric or cinnamon," Anderson says.

We sampled dishes from rustic to elegant, from simple to complex, and from mild and soupy to rich and dark, with spices you can taste. We sampled dishes from North India, from South India, and from East Africa, cooked with chicken breast or chicken thigh, generally marinated first and cooked either in a tandoor or in the oven. Some dishes had cream integral to the sauce and some with cream added at the end and swirled on top.

We loved the creative butter chicken dishes too, taking an already delicious dish and adapting it to fit our time, our place, and our circumstances; we discovered some fun variations and some positively addictive and unexpected takes on the traditional curry in the form of pies, pizzas, perogies, pasta, and poutine – and everything in between.

For me, butter chicken became so much more than a dish; it became a verb, "Sorry I'm butter chickening, I'll get back to you." And a measure of time, "I'll be with you in two butter chickens."

We visited nominated locations in all four corners of the city to evaluate the sauce, the chicken, the accompaniments, and presentation. We discovered a very wide variety of each, and met some passionate and proud people; indeed one of the best parts of the whole exercise is meeting chefs, servers, and owners that we may not have otherwise met.

"I was fortunate to meet some of the best talent and loved the creativity



and thought behind each nomination," says Rattani. "Each dish has its own take on butter chicken which not only showcased this amazing dish in the best light, but also highlighted that there are numerous talented chefs within our city."

#### **What makes the perfect butter chicken? What were we looking for?**

- As with all food, we were looking for balance in the sauce: not too creamy and not too tomato-y. Not too sweet, but with a complexity and depth of flavour and spice.
- The chicken should be marinated and, if possible, cooked in a tandoor for maximum flavour, although grilled and roasted are good too. It should be moist and tender, and plentiful in the sauce.
- The accompaniments should also be flavourful and complementary to the dish.
- And finally, our "overall" assessment was given twice the weight of each of the previous categories, and we each wrangled with "how likely would you be to recommend this to a friend"? We take this very seriously, and if we're recommending the best of the best, every piece has to be good – and consistently good.

#### **We've split our awards into two distinct categories:**

- First, what we'll call the "Classic" butter chicken: chicken pieces in a tomato cream curry sauce, served with basmati rice and/or buttered or garlic naan.
- "Creative" – dishes using butter chicken in new ways!

It was a very close contest, and there were many really good dishes that we couldn't include here. With the on-going restrictions posed by Covid-19, some of these restaurants may be working with reduced menus or limited opening hours. You may wish to call ahead or reach out directly to them.

#### **We're delighted to announce the highest scoring "Classic" butter chicken:**

##### **Mirchi**

Unit 1130 - 76 Westwinds Crescent NE

"The dish is in complete balance! Not too tomato-y, not too creamy. The fenugreek is here, but not too much. The chicken is tender and flavourful, and there is a great finishing heat. This was my family's favourite, we all loved it." **KA**

#### **Highly Recommended winners are (in alphabetical order):**

##### **Calcutta Cricket Club**

340 17 Avenue SW

"The complexity of the spices in each aspect of the dish, from the chicken marinade to the sauce, showed that each component of the dish had its own purpose. I love the use of whole spices, such as cardamom pods and bay leaf, to balance the sauce." **FR**

##### **Cinnamon**

1207 11 Avenue SW

"The addition of cream to a buttery gravy gives a silky smooth, rich texture, and we love the use of honey in the sauce. It was served with scented basmati rice and amazingly fluffy naan cooked in an oven tandoor, a traditional accompaniment." **FR**



### Clay Oven

3131 27 Street NE

"I'm very impressed. There were tender and succulent morsels of chicken in a dark red sauce, with the tomato and cream kept in check. Nice spicing and a bit of heat to finish. It came with saffron rice and bread made in a clay oven - love it!" **KA**

### Indie Counter Culture "Butterface"

126 10 Street NW

"The chicken is marinated for 48 hours before it is cooked in a traditional kettle tandoor, so the maximum flavour is embedded into the dish. I loved the sauce with its flavours of garlic and ginger, along with traditional North Indian spices." **FR**

### Indian Express

1126 Kensington Road NW

"The thick, creamy sauce is perfectly flavoured with just the right amount of kick to it, and the traditionally cooked chicken thighs are smoky with tandoori flavour. The garlic naan is made with fresh garlic and basted with the right amount of butter." **GS**

### Madras Café Restaurant,

175 52 Street SE

"The flavours in the sauce were very balanced, and it was robust and perfectly creamy. The oven-baked chicken thighs had just the right amount of spice, and the South Indian paratha is the best I've had since I came to Canada." **GS**

### Moti Mahal, 1805 14 Street SW

"The sauce is rich and deep, and really flavourful, as is the chicken cooked in the tandoor. I ordered medium spice and it was the perfect spice level for me. It came with fragrant rice and a first class garlic naan (I could have eaten that on its own!)." **LG**

### Safari Grill, 255 28 Street SE

"Excellent sauce - well balanced and creamy with a little bit of heat at the finish. Chef marinates the chicken overnight in yogurt and spice masala, and it's incredibly tender. It's very elegant, I would definitely recommend and take a friend back (there)." **KA**

### Our highest scoring "Creative" butter chicken:

#### Indian Express Butter Chicken

**Poutine**, 1126 Kensington Road NW  
Available on weekend brunch menu.

"I loved this dish, it was outstanding. Such a creative take on butter chicken, and a well thought-out dish. We loved the poached eggs and the addition of the cheese curds; the house-made hollandaise sauce added a depth of flavour." **FR**

### Highly Recommended winners are (in alphabetical order):

#### Indie Counter Culture Butter

**Chicken Poutine**, 126 10 Street NW

"The cheese curds were wonderful and balanced the acidity of the tomato sauce. The chicken was tender and the fries were delicious - a great invention! A beautiful presentation, I'd absolutely recommend. Share and eat again." **KA**

#### Madras Café Restaurant Butter

**Chicken Dosa**, 175 52 Street SE

"Outstanding! The sauce is not too creamy, so it works so well in a dosa (a huge Indian crepe). It comes with sambar (lentil-tamarind curry), coconut chutney, and tomato-ginger chutney. I virtually inhaled this and kept going back for more." **LG**

#### Pie Junkie Butter Chicken Pie

8 Spruce Centre SW

"A great creative dish - anyone would love this. The butter chicken sauce is good, a bit less creamy, spicy, and very flavourful. The quality of the chicken is

top notch and the pie pastry is amazing! It's highly recommended." **GS**

#### Shack Poutine and Butter Chicken

**Sliders**, White Diamond Conference Center, 130 3 Avenue SE

"Delivery only, butter chicken comes in many guises here - as curry, over perogies, with pasta, on a flatbread, with wings, and as mac 'n' cheese - but it was the sliders that really stood out for me. A really good bun makes them a great handheld." **LG**

#### The Samosa Factory Butter Chicken

**Samosas**, Unit 135, 55 Westwinds Crescent NE

"25 mini samosas come with tamarind sauce and pudina (mint) chutney - and they are addictive - once you start you can't stop. The ground chicken breast is in a butter chicken sauce but the sauce isn't runny, so the pastry stays really crispy." **LG**

### Our judges:



**Karen Anderson**, who has led seven cuisine and culture trips to India and is co-author of "A Spicy Touch" cookbook.



**Linda Garson**, who eats and drinks for a living, and ate every single nominated dish - and then some!



**Fahreen Rattani Remtulla**, who is very experienced in the complexity and diversity of spices and Indian cooking techniques.



**Chef Guru Singh**, who has been cooking both Indian and contemporary Canadian cuisine for many years.

In collaboration with:

