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Kent's Maza Grill will win your heart with its massive halal steaks

By JACKIE VARRIANO
Seattle Times food writer

KENT — Before Naseeruddin Chishti became a chef, he was a forensic accountant. His first wife was in the military and the pair traveled the world for work. Originally from Pakistan, Chishti has always been curious about food, constantly taking cooking classes to learn different techniques and recipes.

After spending time learning from London-based chef Hugh McGivern (former personal chef for The Rock), he quit the forensic accounting and opened Maza Grill in Kent in 2011 in a strip mall anchored by a Safeway.

Initially, the focus was on halal meats and an assortment of dishes collected from Chishti's travels, fried chicken and waffles, burgers, Lebanese chicken skewers. Halal meats are slaughtered according to Islamic law by hand with a clean cut, bleated beforehand, with the blood drained completely.

Over the years, the menu has evolved, and Maza Grill has come to focus on halal meats showcased in traditional Pakistani dishes, steaks, and a handful of burgers and sandwiches. There's freshly baked naan, fragrant basmati rice topped with almonds and raisins, and a couple of vegetarian options.

Chishti says people were skeptical when he first opened — "A Pakistani guy is going to make a steak for us?" — but he says he's had good luck fulfilling his mission of "spreading love" through food.

There aren't as many cuisines as other steakhouses, but the meat is never frozen. If they can't get it from their halal butcher, they don't serve the item that day. Interesting menu items include a lamb steak (\$24.99) and a half-pound New York Steak burger (\$14.95).

Chishti makes a dozen burgers at a time as it is, grinding the meat in-house, but the New York is ground to order.

On a visit to Maza Grill, you'll most likely be greeted by Chishti's wife, Tina Tjinnawati. She runs the front of the house with a firm, calm hand. Once seated, she'll ask if



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Halal steaks are hand-cut at Maza Grill, served with roasted potatoes and rice alongside a mushroom and caramelized onion compote.

you've ever been in before.

If you haven't, she'll open the menu for you, asking you what kind of meat you like, how spicy you like things and your hunger level. Questions about her favorite dishes are expertly batted away — she's guiding you toward a meal you'll be happy with.

She also warns you of cooking time, as some dishes have a wait time of 20 minutes. To take the edge off, there are small plates of corn chips drizzled with house-made garlic and chipotle sauces.

"People love it because it's free," Tjinnawati says with a laugh. It's also really good. A variation of chips and salsa. And I couldn't stop eating them.

With Tjinnawati's guidance I ordered the Punjabi boti chicken tikka (\$18.95), marinated grilled chicken skewered and served with rice, garlic sauce and spicy green chutney.

The skewer is practically a sword, and for a second I contemplate just brandishing it about victorious be-



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fore relieving it of its four massive hunks of grilled chicken breast.

The richly spiced meat is an exception to the notion that chicken breast is always a dry affair. You

don't need the garlic sauce, but it's terrific — as is the spicy chutney.

Tjinnawati says the chutney is best eaten with the rice and she's right. As I'm eating, three women in

burgas walk in and proceed directly to the back of the restaurant. There is a prayer room in the back, as well as a private area for women who are uncomfortable dining in mixed company.

"We're the only restaurant who has a proper prayer room. Anyone can use it. We go and recharge our batteries as well," Chishti says. On my second visit to Maza Grill, I order the rib-eye. The menu says it's 17-plus ounces (\$33.95).

Chishti says he hand-cuts each steak and his hands are big. As a result, you can get steaks of up to 20 ounces for the same price. "I'm not giving a small portion," he says.

The steaks are rubbed with salt and rosemary, finished with butter and served with a side of mushroom and caramelized onion compote. The steak has great flavor and a nice crust, the compote adding a hint of rich sweetness. The accompanying potatoes are crunchy with a creamy interior, but you can also get rice if you wish.

Tjinnawati quietly roams the dining room, checking in on guests and making sure everything is satisfactory. The only waiter available is bottled, but it's free and unlimited. There is no alcohol served.

There are a handful of booths, but most of the restaurant is set up with long tables. Chishti says many people bring their extended family, some coming from as far as Richmond, B.C., for the halal meat. Over the years, they've seen families grow.

"We have 200-300 grandchildren now," he says with a laugh.

Chishti says he knows they might not be "making money," but "we're winning hearts," he says, and it's absolutely true.

Jackie Varriano
jvarriano@seattletimes.com

Tina and Naseer Chishti

Maza Grill

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