

In its own element

EATING OUT *The Higher Taste tempts those willing to forgo their onions, garlic, spices and garam masala*

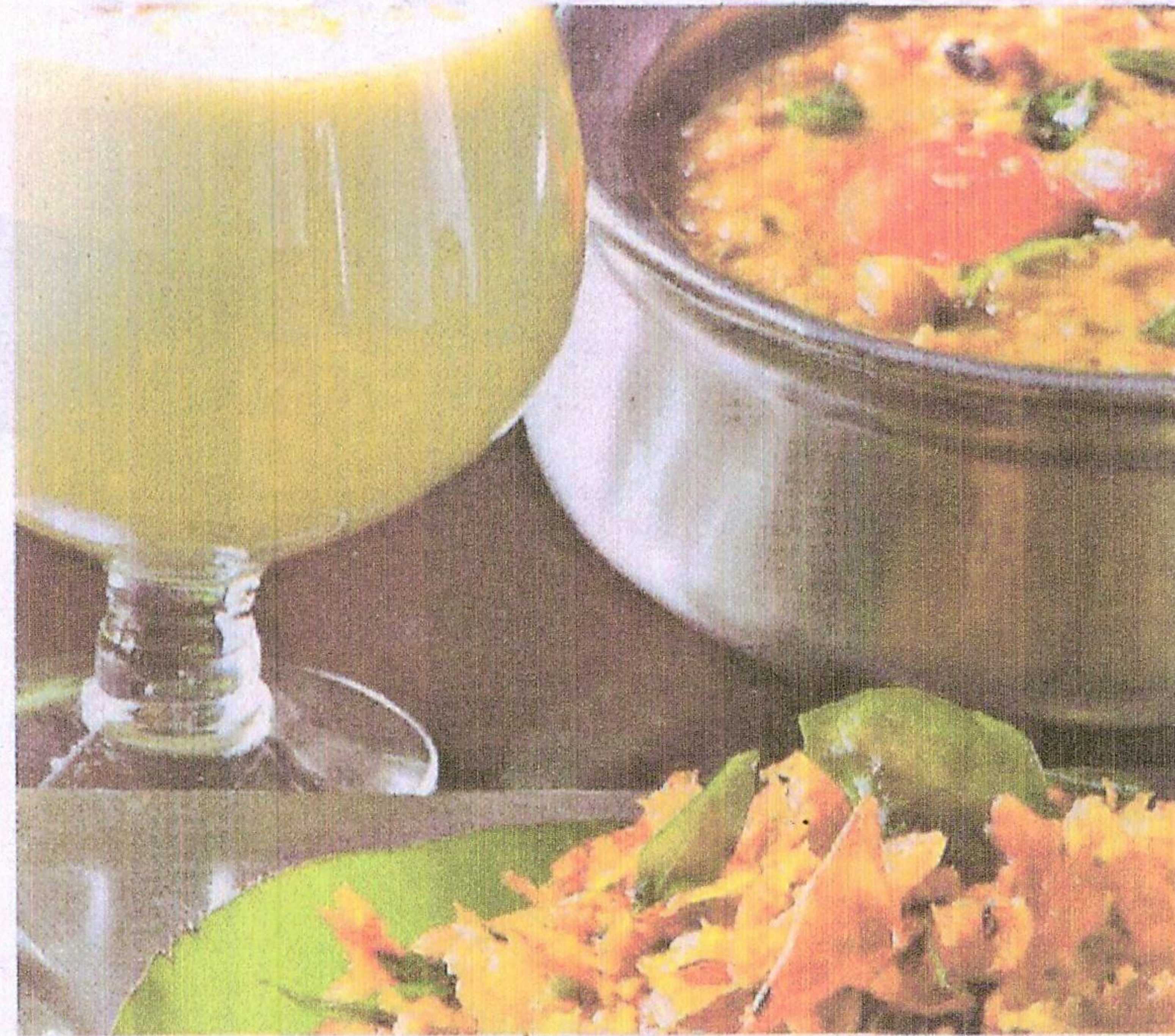
Anyone who's been to ISKCON cannot miss the connection they make between God and food. You would have wound your way down the maze of the food court at the temple, where all food served is considered "prasada", be it cakes or cookies. So it isn't surprising now, that they've set up The Higher Taste, a sattvik restaurant atop the hill, nestled amidst the abode of the Gods.

Hmmm... sattvik or saatvik, however you choose to spell it, it's quite a complex concept of food, of an attitude towards food, and an approach to making and eating it. I have come to understand that it's food that's fresh and with a certain vitality, where you enjoy a food's inherent taste, without too many spices. There should be a certain subtlety to it. Ultimately it's food that induces a certain sense of peace and well-being. But I guess that sort of impact of food shows when it's consumed over a period of time. When I went to The Higher Taste, I was wondering how sattvik would be interpreted.

I'm greeted with courtesy, and a tongue-twisting menu. Most of it is heritage cuisine, I'm told, and the original names (in Tamil) have been retained. The table is set with

a wooden platter with positions scooped out for plates, spoon, fork et al. The extremely high-back sofas are a bit uncomfortable, but give privacy by blocking out the folks at the next table. The ground floor of the restaurant offers a set-menu buffet (Rs. 300 plus taxes per head). A golden yellow pumpkin soup (the soup of the day) is what comes out of the kitchen first. It looks warm and inviting, the way soup should. The buttery and nutty flavours make me wonder if it's laced with cashew. Apparently not; it's flour-based. It's followed up with a generous tasting platter of starters. The inji vadai, a more gingery and less juicy version of the aambodey/masala vadey shares space with palkatti varuval — deep fried paneer. While the paneer is succulent and welcoming, I'm still surprised by the inclusion of fried food on the menu. Fried food is avoided on the sattvik diet. The bolt out of the blue is delivered by the kavipoo varuval. The desi version of the rather infamous "gobi manchuri", this one's marinated in spices so subtle and deep fried, coated with urad flour batter. It's crunchy, non-rubbery, and you can savour the tender gobi floret.

The main course has been pre-



HERITAGE CUISINE On a platter

ordered for us. The soft, layered, golden-coloured kesariya sheermal and chilli-cheese naan make up the bread basket. Accompanying them are the mangai kilangu thodukari — a raw mango and potato curry that takes advantage of the tothapuri season to give your tastebuds a tangy wake-up smack. The vazhaipoo murungai kolambu is an acquired taste. While the drumstick is the old man on the kolambu scene, it's the overpowering and woody taste

and aroma of the banana flower that lingers on. The zafrani kofta, as the name royally suggests, is too rich (and a tad too sweet), submerged in a profusion of paneer, peanuts, cashew, and saffron. Though the paneer kothu parota is part of the breadbasket, it's a dish in itself. I mean, how can scrambled paneer with minced parota with basic spices thrown in, ever go wrong? The vetrilai thakkaali satham raises your expectations with the

promise of a pulao made with beetle leaves and tomatoes. But the beetle leaf is used so sparingly that the desired effect doesn't really materialise. While the restaurant may offer a rather simplistic interpretation of sattvik — no onion, garlic, chillies — I guess you can't blame them either because like Indian Chinese, it's adapted to pander to the tastes of the public. But, for a sattvik menu, there's surprisingly very little raw food or salads on offer; raw being synonymous with uncooked, and therefore, fresh.

Dessert is an indulgence of elaneer payasam, nendhrapazam dosai, and paan ice cream. The payasam is for those who like to end the meal with a light dessert made of tender coconut and coconut milk — not too sweet, healthy, and satisfying the dessert cravings. The dosai is for those who would like to end their meal with a bang. It's sizzling hot banana dosa garnished with fried cashews. Heavy duty stuff. But what takes the cake is the mastermind paan ice-cream. It's a paan (sans supaari) minced and whipped with ice-cream! As gross as that may sound, you must taste it to believe how divine and soothing this dessert is. A quasi-traditional end to a nourishing meal.

Higher Taste is at ISKCON Temple & Cultural Complex, Hare Krishna Hill, Chord Road. Call 22766501.

BHUMIKA K.

Ambience: Quiet
Service: Attentive
Specialty: Paan ice cream
Wallet Factor: Rs. 1,000 for two