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Saravanaa Bhavan's outlet on Syed Alwi Road has a modern look and feel.

Tasty tradition

Saravanaa Bhavan offers the flavour of home, and more. VIJAYA SUBRAMANIAN refreshes her taste-buds at this family restaurant.

The place: Madras Central railway station. The usual hustle-bustle, the noises, the crowd, the confusion, the pushing and jostling with luggage – not a place you would visit as a tourist attraction! Not unless you have a train to catch or you have to receive or see off friends or relatives.

But I loved going to Madras Central on any pretext, the reason being the Saravanaa Bhavan restaurant inside the station!

My mouth still waters when I think about the hot pongal, crispy dosas with coconut chutney, red chutney and sambar, the spicy adai-avial, the lemon rice, tomato rice, tamarind rice and the curd rice – just out of this world! My only complaint was that the quantity seemed too little – maybe because everything was so good that I would wolf it down at superfast speed.

And the grand finale used to be the absolutely fabulous cup of fragrant filtered coffee – the likes of which I

have not had anywhere else in my life. Although Saravanaas have branches all over India and several of them in Madras itself, that railway station outlet has made the most lasting impression on me.

It was thus a happy surprise when Saravanaa Bhavan opened their new outlet in the Little India area. When we discovered that they have begun making the savoury Kanchipuram Idlis (\$3.30), I was even more delighted.

Sriram Raghavan, the soft-spoken, affable owner of Singapore's Saravanaa Bhavan, explained that the Kanchipuram Idli had come about because of author Shashi Tharoor's visit to Singapore for the first India Se – India Club Literary Salon in late February.

The writer had asked for this dish, but Saravanaa Bhavan did not have it on the menu at that time. "I thought, why not introduce it," says Raghavan.

Saravanaa Bhavan – which is the largest Indian vegetarian restaurant chain with more than 50 branches serving about 150,000 customers a day – started

in Singapore in 2001, and Raghavan took over the franchise about a year ago. Its latest outlet is at Syed Alwi Road, conveniently located opposite Mustafa Centre.

The family-friendly restaurant is set in a shophouse with a charmingly modern ambience and outdoor seating. In addition to the old favourites, the yummy menu now includes items like chaat, fresh juices, milkshakes and New Zealand Naturals ice cream – specially useful for people with children! The 2,500-sq-ft restaurant, which seats about 170, is set over two levels. The upstairs section also has a party hall which is popular for birthday parties, Raghavan says.

The menu has a larger variety of dishes, whose flavour has been improved to match the taste of the Madras outlets. In fact, we found that the dishes taste just like "back home" but with one difference – the portions are bigger here!

The menu features North Indian and South Indian dishes, and includes regular favourites such as our top choice, Kara Dosa (\$4.30), and a wide range of other dosas and scrumptious idlis, starting at \$2.50 (Steamed Idli). Stronger hunger pangs call for main courses – a biryani or a pulao (\$4.50), the thali meals (\$5.50-\$6) or one of the "Tongue Ticklers" like Aloo Capsicum or Paneer Dopiaza (\$4.20 each) with Roti (\$1.50), Naan (\$1.80) or Kulcha (\$1.80).

Our shopping trips to Mustafa are now more like an outing, since we inevitably drop in at Saravanaas for a meal or a snack. **is**

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