

# Beyond Tikka Masala

Text and photographs by SEBASTIAN JOHN

“Let’s try Indian food for dinner!”

You’ll hear these words more often now from average Americans. Even small towns like Eureka in California (population 42,000) have Indian restaurants—two, in fact. These bastions of spice are considered exotic and different, except for the fact that most of them are the same. Every restaurant has *naan*, chicken tikka masala and *saag paneer* on the menu, and those are what the customers usually order. Most of the other dishes are a mishmash of North Indian and Pakistani cuisine, with little representation of anything south of New Delhi. While tasty for sure, the offerings need an update.

Indian food in America is now at an interesting evolutionary stage. Having gained wider acceptance, it is still seen as mostly buffet food, says Vikas Khanna, executive chef at Purnima restaurant in New York. This is because curries are generally meant to be shared, not presented with fancy garnishes on individual plates, which is the image Americans seek from a nice restaurant.

By using new kinds of ingredients, like asparagus, to take a south Indian dish like *uttapam* into the spotlight of Washington, D.C.’s theater district, or fusing the two countries’ cuisines to please traditional diners in tony neighborhoods of Manhattan, Indian American chefs and hosts are working to expand the concept of Indian food. Culinary visionaries are doing amazing work across the country.

*From top: Watermelon at Tabla restaurant; seared day boat cod at Tabla; aloo tikki chhole at The Bombay Club; tandoori platter at Purnima restaurant; shrimp curry at Purnima; and apple jalebis at Rasika.*



Courtesy Union Square Hospitality Group



Courtesy Union Square Hospitality Group



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### From busboy to owner

When 55-year-old Avtar Walia began his career 30 years ago as a busboy, he wondered why Indian food was not rated in the same category as French, Italian and Japanese as an ethnic cuisine. He soon found out: nearly every dish was created from exactly the same blend of spice—curry powder. “I have asked, ‘Do you know exactly what curry means?’ ” says Walia. Most people think it is some kind of spice, and know nothing else about it, he says.

Walia wanted to open a restaurant where the food was authentic but trendy. So he opened Tamarind in one of Manhattan’s richest neighborhoods, where he made sure that the dishes were made with fresh ingredients, and, most importantly, presented well.

“Good plating makes food look appealing, and it makes people want to eat,” says Walia.

When Tamarind started, he roped in Raji Jallepalli-Reiss as

his executive chef, to design the menu. She had run her own restaurant in Memphis, Tennessee, and has been credited with originating the fusion of Indian and French cuisines before her death from cancer in 2002.

Walia did not stop at the menu. He got Wid Chapman, a senior faculty member of the Parsons School of Design in New York City, to design Tamarind’s interior as simple but elegant. He brought in custom-made, silver-plated platters from Rajasthan to use as dishes, and created intimate private booths for celebrity clientele.

For him, a well-trained chef who can deliver consistent dishes is the most important element. Indian food, though behind other regional cuisines, “is catching on like wildfire,” he says, noting that many American customers know the exact differences between *rogan josh* and *jalfrezi*, and expect their food to be just as spicy as they have tasted in India.

Above: Rasika restaurant in Washington, D.C.

Right: Tamarind’s Avtar Walia has risen from a busboy to restaurateur during his 30-year career.

Far right: The dining area of Tamarind restaurant in New York.



Courtesy, Tamarind

## Conquering the capital

Ashok Bajaj's American restaurant, The Oval Room, is one of U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice's favorite restaurants in Washington, D.C. Conveniently located just a short walk from the White House, The Oval Room is across the street from Bajaj's flagship business, The Bombay Club. Open for 20 years, it was one of the first fine-dining Indian restaurants in the United States.

Opening The Bombay Club was not easy, Bajaj says. Though he had run successful Indian restaurants in London prior to coming to America in 1988, he had to convince his first landlord that an Indian restaurant wouldn't ruin the building with bad smells. They thought, "It's going to stink," he says. Finally, Bajaj took the extreme step of flying the landlord to London so he could experience the potential of high-end Indian food. Only then did he get the space. Now he owns six Washington eateries, including a caviar bar and the more modern Indian restaurant, Rasika.

"You've got to get away from the perception of ghee, heavy cream and oils," Bajaj warns.

His philosophy of spices is that though they should not be eliminated, they should also not overpower the food. He noticed when he first arrived that everyone would talk about how tasty the Indian sauces were, and not the food itself. "I want them to



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*Above: Ashok Bajaj owns six Washington eateries, including Rasika.*

*Above right: Chef Vikas Khanna at Purnima in New York.*

*Below: Bajaj's Bombay Club in Washington, D.C.*

taste the main ingredient," he says.

Though Bajaj likes to stick with local, fresh ingredients, there is one thing he gets from India: Kashmiri chillies. Nothing can match their color, sweetness and spiciness, so he has them specially flown in. His main chefs are Indian, too, and he tries to maintain authenticity in the food despite using novel ingredients





like asparagus. And the love of Indian cuisine spills over to his other establishments: The Oval Room featured a lobster vindaloo this Valentine's Day.

### Catering for celebrities

Vikas Khanna, a rising star in the swirling world of New York restaurants, is also an object of desire. He talks, rather embarrassed, about a photo shoot he recently did with his shirt off for a "sexiest man" feature in *People* magazine.

The 36-year-old chef has been featured on a popular American TV show, *Kitchen Nightmares*, where he swooped in with celebrity chef Gordon Ramsay to save an ailing Indian restaurant in Manhattan. Now he works there as an executive chef, and spends his spare time managing special banquets for celebrities like Salman Rushdie, setting up charity fundraisers and writing cookbooks.

Khanna has some off-the-wall ideas. He makes tandoori peaches, chocolate *idli* soufflé and *paan* flavored *kulfi*. But don't call his food fusion: "Indian food itself is so fusion," he says, having so many influences over the centuries. Trained in classical French cooking, he tries to create "a little surprise element" by keeping the ingredients traditional but using different methods to prepare the dishes. He's not shy about boasting of the time he floored magazine food critics by using a French method of stuffing the skin of chicken (while leaving the whole thing intact) with masala and mushrooms, then cooking it in a tandoor.

Khanna's fingers, spotted with knife scars, are tribute to his perseverance. Due to a childhood accident, his left eye has a clot that hinders his eyesight, so he's constantly cutting his fingers as he cooks. A foundation he started, Sakiv (South Asian Kid's Infinite Vision) creates awareness about vision disorders in children and sponsors Braille libraries across the world.

Before he came to the United States in 2001, Khanna ran a successful family catering business in Amritsar, Punjab, for many years, and also worked at some of India's best hotels

including the Leela Group in Mumbai, Maharashtra. In New York, he worked as a dishwasher before climbing up the ladder to be an executive chef. The main obstacle for the average Indian restaurant, he says, is fear. "All my life I'll be categorizing myself as Indian," but that doesn't mean he can't get out of a comfort zone and try new dishes and new ways of thinking about the food.

### Fusion comes full circle

Even though he now runs *Tabla*, arguably the most famous Indian fusion restaurant in America, Floyd Cardoz never thought he would come to the United States. A Goan who grew up in Mumbai and trained in Switzerland, he dreamed of going to Australia.

"I came purely by chance," he says, after filling out a form incorrectly in his bid to emigrate to Australia. As he waited for the confusion to be rectified, the U.S. visa his brother had sponsored for him came through, and he found himself in New York in 1988 for his sibling's wedding. He gave himself a few months and a hard deadline: If he had no job by that date, he would go back to India. Cardoz ended up being hired the day before he would have flown home.

After first working in some traditional Indian restaurants, he took a demotion and entered a French-Asian fusion restaurant as a salad chef to learn new techniques and how to blend cuisines. "I always wanted to do this," he says, remembering how he once created a curry for his father with rosemary and Riesling wine added to it.

Now as executive chef and co-owner of *Tabla*, which he opened in 1998 with restaurateur Danny Meyer, he marries east and west, like traditional American crab cakes laced with Indian spices and served with pappadams. Or

Below: Chef Floyd Cardoz at *Tabla*.  
Bottom: *Tabla's* dining room.



Courtesy Union Square Hospitality Group



Courtesy Union Square Hospitality Group



*Maya Kaimal with her line of curry bases and chutneys that are sold in supermarkets across the United States.*

steamed red snapper with a lime-jaggery glaze. Traditional Indian breads are served at the beginning of the meal, just as in traditional American eating, and his staff is well-educated to explain every dish to newcomers—a key to acceptance and success, he says. “If you have good service, you can make the food taste better,” says Cardoz, 47. “Translating is important.”

He says the toughest skill to teach trainee American chefs is how to cook the spices and “coax the flavors out,” something not so common in Western cooking.

### Dad’s food for the masses

Maya Kaimal’s father is an Indian physicist with a passion for cooking. “He approached cooking like he approached physics,” she says, and would consider a dish a failure unless he could replicate perfectly from a recipe.

Little did Kaimal, a former photo editor now based in Woodstock in New York state, know that she would eventually turn her father’s favorite pastime into her own successful business. After being laid off from a food magazine in 2002, Kaimal, 42, started her own line of fresh, refrigerated curry bases and chutneys that are sold in supermarkets across the United States.

#### For more information:

Vikas Khanna, Purnima

<http://www.vkhanna.com/index.html>

Avtar Wallia, Tamarind

<http://www.tamarinde22.com/index.html>

Ashok Bajaj, The Oval Room

<http://www.ovalroom.com/>

Floyd Cardoz, Tabla

<http://www.tablany.com/>

Maya Kaimal

<http://mayakaimal.com/about.html>

Just add meat and vegetables to her tamarind curry, and you can have fresh, home-style South Indian tastes half a world away from Kerala.

But it wasn’t easy. When she set out to make Indian food that reflected her own experience, she had to learn about manufacturing, packing and running a business from a knowledge base of zero. First, she perfected her recipes at home. As she gathered knowledge at food conventions, she slowly started scaling them up to three liters, 37 liters, and beyond. Then she hit a proverbial wall: onions.

“Onions were a real challenge....Western equipment is not made for Indian food,” Kaimal says, laughing as her twin daughters played outside her living room. Browning onions, a key step in Indian cooking, no matter the region, was a big problem when done on a large scale. Most American equipment in food processing plants consists of large kettles, and onions need a flat surface with lots of contact with heat.

Luckily, she ended up meeting a plant manager who was ready to take on the challenge. After much experimentation and some equipment modification, the plant now browns onions for about nine hours on a large stove surface when making Kaimal’s products. It’s labor intensive, but worth it to get that authentic taste, Kaimal says.

Her line includes both North Indian curries such as *korma*, and South Indian flavors she remembers from her childhood. Her bestsellers reflect that range: coconut and tikka curry flavors are the most popular. As she has found, “There is a huge appetite for Indian food among Americans. They’ll eat what you give them, they’ll eat so much more.”



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