

UNDER THE TOQUE

Vermilion's Maneet Chauhan blends Indian, Latin flavors

BY CAROLYN WALKUP

Maneet Chauhan, the young and enthusiastic executive chef of Vermilion, a contemporary pioneering Indian-Latin fusion restaurant in Chicago, is passionate about her work. The native of India graduated at the top of her class at the Welcome Group Graduate School of Hotel Administration, India's leading hotel management school. She interned at several of India's top hotels and kitchens, including the Taj Group, Oberoi Hotels and Le Meridian.

She moved to the United States upon acceptance into The Culinary Institute of America in Hyde Park, N.Y., from which she graduated with high honors and awards. Her first position after graduation was at a startup fine-dining Indian restaurant in New Jersey.

Now settled in Chicago, she looks forward to going to work every day and creating everything from new cocktails to desserts to stimulate her adventurous customers' taste buds.

How did you first get interested in cooking?

My mom says I was born with a ladle in my hand. I grew up in a small community of people from all over India. I went to people's houses and asked them what they were having for lunch or dinner. I would sit right there while they were cooking and ask questions about what they were doing. It was fascinating for me to be eating all these different cuisines.

Did your parents approve of your career choice?

My parents were very supportive of this career. In India, it's very out of the ordinary to not want to be a doctor or other professional. My dad in particular said that I should do whatever I wanted, but just be sure I did the best I could at it.

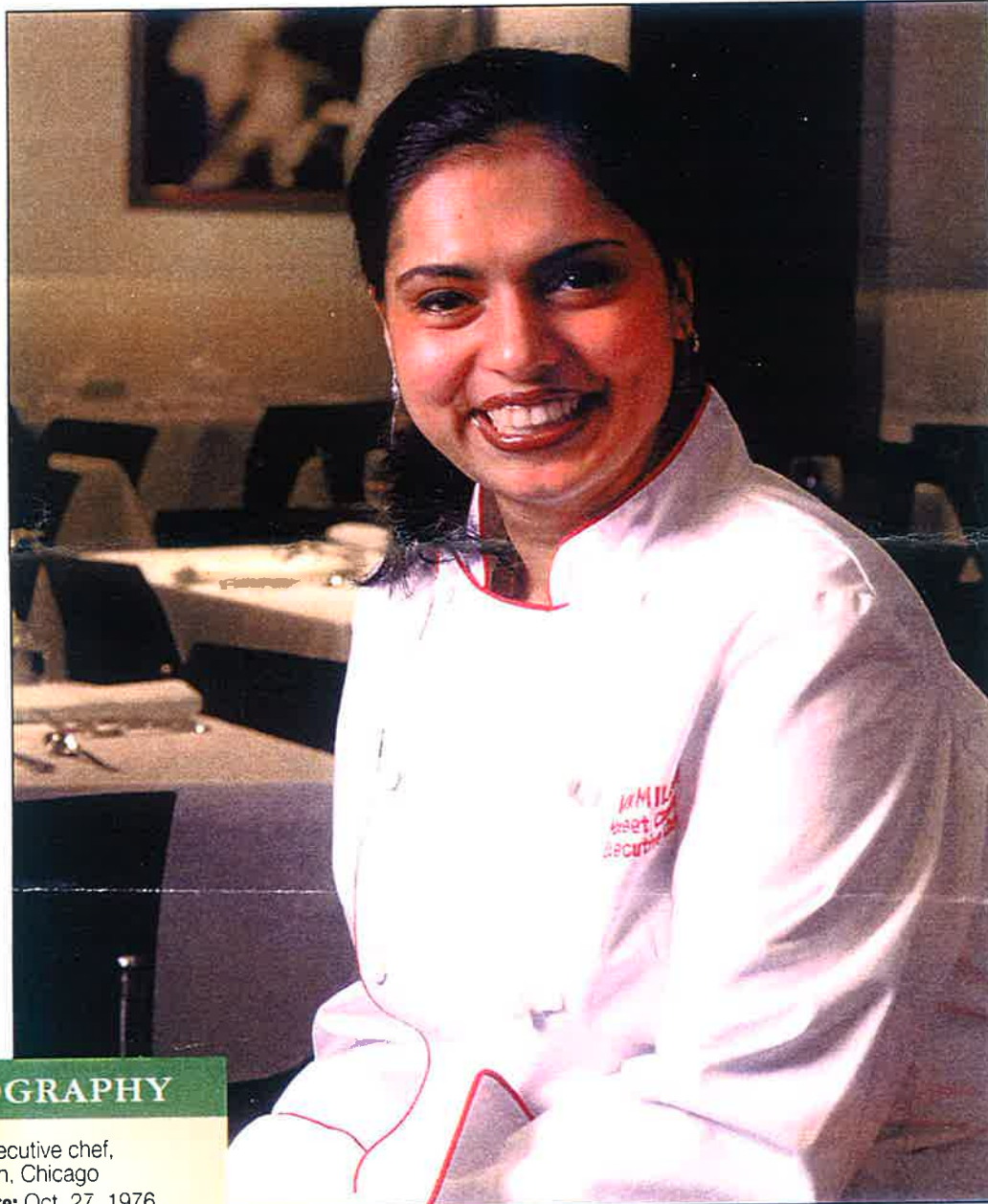
How did you end up in Chicago?

My sister was in Chicago, so I came here to see her in the middle of December. I'd never felt that kind of cold, but I fell in love with the place — the plethora of different kinds of restaurants was fascinating to me. I packed my car back East and drove here to look for a chef's job.

Where did you meet Vermilion's owner, Rohini Dey? I met the chef at Monsoon, another Indian restaurant in Chicago, and he connected me with Rohini, who was looking for a chef and raising capital to open Vermilion. She interviewed over 40 chefs before she hired me. We instantly clicked.

How is your food different from that served in most Indian restaurants in the area?

It's not typical Indian food. It's Indian and Latin and a marriage of these two cuisines. I'm not following a path but creating a path. Over the last two years, we have used spices, other ingredients and techniques that lent



As executive chef of Vermilion in Chicago, Maneet Chauhan, who was born in India, combines the flavors of India with the flavors of Latin America to create such dishes as tandoori skirt steak with orange-fig chutney on spinach rice.

BIOGRAPHY

Title: executive chef, Vermilion, Chicago
Birth date: Oct. 27, 1976
Hometown: Ranchi, India
Education: The Culinary Institute of America, Hyde Park, N.Y.

Career highlights: being accepted at the CIA; being included in "best new restaurants" ratings in Chicago Magazine and Wine Enthusiast and Esquire magazines; cooking at the James Beard House

themselves beautifully to both cuisines.

How does the contemporary style of the restaurant complement your food?

Rohini wanted to define what today's India is all about. It's not just the Taj Mahal and snake charmers. The oversized photographs on the walls are from the leading Indian fashion photographers. We wanted to give the restaurant an edge and make it about who we are.

Where did the fusion element come from?

Fusion was always my passion. You need to keep moving ahead in life. Creativity is a big part of that.

Who is your target market?

People who appreciate food. My highlight of every day is to go through every comment card. People are very detailed about what they liked. They are people who are not afraid to try something new.

Have you changed the menu since Vermilion opened?

Yes. We're calling it the deeper, bolder Vermilion. We recently changed the menu 90 percent. The majority of our guests are repeat clientele, so we wanted to give them something

new. We did a lot of research and food tastings. We haven't held back. We haven't Americanized it.

What are a few of your best-selling dishes that illustrate your fusion approach?

Tandoori skirt steak in a classic Indian marinade with orange-fig chutney on spinach rice, and Amazonian seafood and vegetable stew with a kick.

How many hours a week do you work?

I work 60 or so. I try to take time off, but I'm so passionate about what I do that I sometimes come in on my day off. I'm very lucky to be doing something I love.

Do you expect to always work so hard?

These first years are extremely crucial in building Vermilion and establishing ourselves. I hope I will be able to stand back in a few years.

What do you like to do in your spare time?

I do some crafts. I use tissue papers and make them into strings and put them on vases or gift boxes and give them to my family. It's a nice way to de-stress. I also love going to restaurants that are different — Ethiopian, Sri Lankan and others. I watch movies, both Bollywood and Hollywood. When I have two or three days off, I travel in the region. I like writing and have been keeping a journal for eight years.

Do you enjoy teaching and doing cooking demonstrations for the public?

Yes. I've been on most of the morning TV shows in Chicago, and I've done demonstrations at the Taste of Chicago, the Flower & Garden Show, Bloomingdale's, Sur La Table, Robert Morris College and Francis Parker School. I like seeing people's reactions. They get so excited when I tell them about different things and give small tips. I love answering their questions. ■

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CHEF'S TIPS

- When using spices, always apply some kind of heat so that the oils are released. That truly does justice to the spice.
- To make a dish complete, there has to be a complete balance of flavors — sweet, savory, tart and bitter.
- Don't be afraid of ingredients; just love them, and they will work beautifully for you.