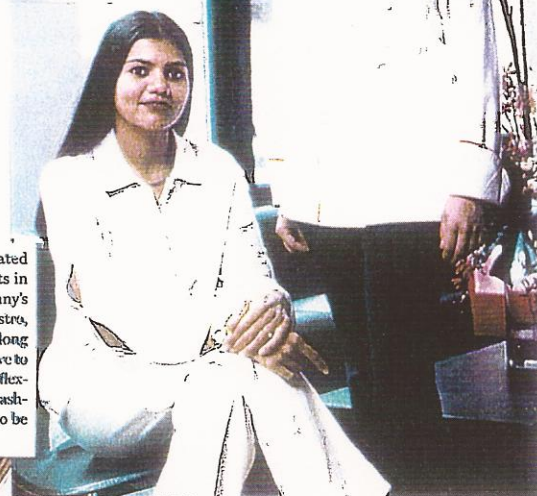


Kitchen Goddesses

Women are surprisingly rare among chefs and owners of top restaurants. But three splendid startups are bucking the trend. BY JULIA BOONSTIN



Owner Rohini Dey (left) and chef Maneet Chauhan are winning raves at Vermilion, a new Indian fusion restaurant in Chicago. Right: Chauhan's signature dish, blackened tamarind ribs.



OVER THE PAST FEW DECADES, AS WOMEN have made strides toward equality in almost every professional field, progress has been surprisingly slow among restaurant owners and chefs. This year just one-fifth of the James Beard-award nominees for best chef were women, a number that has remained flat for the past four years. *Food & Wine's* lists of the best new chefs for 2003 and 2004 had one woman among 20 men. "The restaurant industry hasn't changed much, while other

career paths have," says Ann Cashion, a celebrated Mississippi-born chef who owns two restaurants in Washington, D.C.—Cashion's Eat Place and Johnny's Half Shell. Whether at a diner or a fashionable bistro, working as a chef or restaurant owner demands long hours of grueling, often physical work—and you have to be in the kitchen almost every night. "It's much less flexible to be a chef than to work on Wall Street," says Cashion, 49, who doesn't have children. "It's hard not to be working when the kids get home from school."

OFF HOURS

Alice Waters, founder of Chez Panisse, a mecca of organic cuisine in Berkeley, says her profession's demands discourage many talented women not only at the top but on their way up as well. "It's really uncommon for chefs to be willing to pay for their employees to have flexible schedules," she says. "That's what chefs need to do to keep good women and allow them to rise through the ranks." Waters adds that she could spend time with her daughter while running Chez Panisse only because she owned the restaurant and could set her own schedule.

The good news is that some woman chefs are managing to beat the odds and follow the entrepreneurial example set by Cashion and Waters. The Organization of Women Chefs and Restaurateurs has grown to 2,100 members, up 11% in the past year. Women now make up 35% of the enrollment at the Culinary Institute of America in Hyde Park, N.Y., up from 25% seven years ago. To identify the most noteworthy new woman chefs and restaurant owners, we looked at a dozen woman-run eateries that have opened recently around the country. We wanted those that were not only generating buzz among food critics but also building successful businesses. Here, our three picks.

VERMILION Chicago

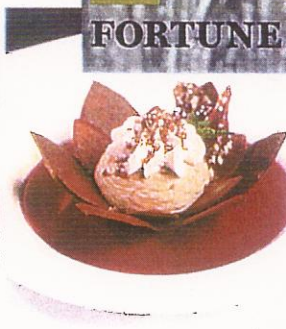
Owner and managing partner:

Rohini Dey

Executive chef: Maneet Chauhan

DEY, 36, WAS BORN IN INDIA AND lived there until she came to graduate school in the U.S. Once here, she wanted to broaden the perceptions of her native country. "I was appalled at the greasy, overspiced Indian fare I encountered here," she says. "Restaurants are a much easier way to introduce Americans to a culture than getting them into museums. I wanted to show that we're not all about sitars and snake charmers."

After stints at McKinsey and the World Bank, Dey last December opened 200-seat Vermilion in downtown Chicago. She hired chef Chauhan, 27, to create



Top: Alfresco dining on Chicago's West Hubbard Street; above: chef Maneet Chauhan's tapas selection (left) and for dessert, frozen dulce de leche mousse

a fusion menu that would leave behind lamb curry for something more innovative. Chauhan had studied the traditional cuisine of India at that country's top hotel management school and opened an Indian restaurant in New Jersey. She had also mastered Continental cuisine at the Culinary Institute of America. There, some of her American colleagues were so averse to spices that when she tried their dishes, "I had to use

Tabasco sauce," says Chauhan. Her menu at Vermilion is complex, with overlapping Indian and Latin American ingredients. She serves empanadas with mango-coconut chutney, a Latin-influenced skirt steak in a traditional tandoori oven, tamarind-sauce ribs with yucca fries and corn salsa, and a tres leches cake flavored with chai and saffron.

So far the business end of Vermilion is on track. Dey spent about \$1 million on

the launch (including funds from private investors and an SBA loan), but the restaurant achieved an operating profit in its first month, and revenue has grown steadily to more than \$180,000 a month over the summer. Vermilion has earned accolades from *Chicago Magazine*, *Esquire*, and *Wine Enthusiast*.

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