

■ EVENT ■

Where the tongue slaps the brain

James Beard House offered some sensational Latin-Indian fusion cuisine for a unique Diwali bash reports **Arthur J Pais**

Nearly 100 *diyas*, petals from some 80 red roses and the pungent fragrances of coriander, *jeera*, curry leaves, tamarind, cardamom and fresh coconut, greeted the 100 or so guests that arrived for the high-profile Diwali dinner at the James Beard House in New York.

This was the first event of its kind at the legendary James Beard House, known worldwide for celebrating the work of both legendary and up-and-coming chefs.

Interestingly the dinner for the November 1 event in New York was created by one of the best-known restaurants in America, Chicago's Vermilion, whose Indian-Latin food has been celebrated in publications ranging from *USA Today* to *The Oprah Magazine* to *Esquire* and *Bon Appétit*.

Esquire's John Mariani described the Vermilion menu as 'an ambitious fusion' of Indian and Latin flavors, and Tanya Wenman Steel called it 'unabashed innovation' in *Bon Appétit*.

Thanks to entrées like grilled skirt steak in tandoori marinade with sautéed spinach and plantains that nicely combine the two seemingly disparate cuisines, *Chicago* magazine named Vermilion one of the Best New Restaurants of 2004 and *Bon Appétit* called it the Biggest Chicago Trendsetter & Scene Setter the same year.

The elaborate banquet menu sent out on November 1 from the kitchen of the James Beard House, and which was home to such celebrated chefs and food book writers as Julia Child and Jacques Pepin, certainly had only a touch of Indian traditional fare - for instance, pani puri, sev papadi, meetha paan, and a raft of Indian mithai.

"This is the second time we are in this house, and we can't believe how lucky we are," said Vermilion owner Rohini Dey. "This event is far more significant than the previous one because this gives us a chance to tell mainstream America a few things about Diwali. At Vermilion in Chicago, we



■ Chef Maneet Chauhan at work at the James Beard House in New York

are marking Diwali too. We feel that this warmest of the festivals should be made known to all Americans."

The food served at the banquet itself was far from the traditional. And yet it was very much in the tradition of the dishes served at the upscale Vermilion. For it was an exciting fusion of Indian and Latin American traditions.

"Can't believe this came from an Indian kitchen," said food writer Karen Weiner Campbell as she sampled escabeche of ahi tuna in cilantro, red onion and lime marinade. It was the kind of food that makes your tongue slap the brain, exclaimed another guest who was enjoy-

ing high profile chefs in the country, and Dey, who isn't much older, is among the set of trendy restaurant owners in the country. *USA Today* cites Dey and Chauhan among a handful of chefs and owners, including Tabla's Floyd Cardoz, who have given the Indian food a new avatar and made it upscale. It won't be long, Dey hopes that major food critics will look at the Indian food in America with the same seriousness they purvey French or Italian food.

"And on a Diwali celebration night like this," she muses, "I think more and more about creative Indian food becoming a household phenomenon."

Chauhan, whose culinary career began when she graduated from the Wellesley College Graduate School of Hotel Administration, and then came to America to study at the Culinary Institute of America, says Dey is a perfect boss. "She loves anything that is truly creative and fusion-oriented," Chauhan says.

At their Chicago restaurant, the mission is very clear: Indian culinary tradition is anything but staid. Over the centuries India has absorbed the cuisines of invaders (like the Persians) and settlers (Parsees). And by marrying Indian and Latin cuisines, Chauhan wants to show Indian food easily welcomes judicious and creative elements from other traditions, even those that evolved over 10,000 miles away in Mexico and Brazil.

To offer such creative fare in the Diwali season was surely an emotional undertaking for Chauhan and Dey. For they were not only celebrating their Indian roots but were also showing that Indian culture, including its gastronomy, is not insular. And that it would take its own forms in another country.

Accompanying Dey and Chauhan were half-a-dozen cooks from Vermilion, including the sous-chef Radhika Desai. Unlike Chauhan and Dey, Desai grew up in America and is drawn by the challenge of

creating new kind of Indian cuisine.

Like at the Diwali dinner, Dey and Chauhan are often asked how they came to mix the two traditions?

There wasn't really a philosophy behind Vermilion's fusion of Indian and Latin flavors, they have said many times. It just happened they loved both cuisines.

"And it so happens that many of the ingredients we use in our cuisine is also part of the Latin cuisine too," says Chauhan. "And let us not forget chilies and tomatoes, which are so important in Indian cuisine came from central America and the Latin American countries."

Her tapas - the bite-sized delicacies - include cardamom, garam masala, and lentils. And her Mysore lamb chops, served at the Diwali meal at James Beard House, are marinated in a spiced lentil mixture then grilled and served on a minty red onion salad. Her tamarind shrimp are coated in black pepper and served with white mung beans and a daikon salad. And the blackened tamarind ribs, which was also a big hit at the Diwali dinner, comes coated with a smoky tamarind sauce on a bed of yucca fries and sweet-corn salsa.

Chauhan's creativity extends to cocktails, too. Hence, there was a herb and spice cocktail served at the dinner, was a champagne based blueberry cardamom fizz. It was followed by a tamarind margarita garnished with kari patta, and then by a lychee ginger martini seasoned with mint. Though the evening saw a parade of gujia, coconut and pista ladoos, the attention grabbing item was the passion fruit chai tart. The delicately prepared treat was made with honey-flavored shrikhand and chai-flavored crème, and was seasoned with mint oil.

Next Diwali Chauhan and Dey should be on national television, cooking a festival dinner watched by a million, says a guest in all seriousness. Dey and Chauhan can easily believe it happening.

"Would we have thought, say, even five years ago, that the James Beard House would celebrate Diwali," says Dey. ■



■ Vermilion owner Rohini Dey and chef Maneet Chauhan pose before the Diwali diyas

ing spinach-queso empanadas. "It is that sensational," she said, as she looked around for another piece of Mysore lamb chop served with a delicious red onion salad. Among the guests were two "investigators" from *Zagat*, the much-respected restaurant guide.

Dey, a management consultant and economist with a doctorate from London School of Economics, she teamed up with chef Maneet Chauhan to open Vermilion about two years ago.

At 27, Chauhan is one of the youngest