

COVER STORY

'Women chefs can take the heat anywhere!'

Working in the restaurants in India over a decade ago was a constant challenge for Maneet Chauhan.

"The men would look at me with the kind of expression that said: Can this girl take the kitchen heat?" says Chauhan, one of America's better-known chefs, whose admirers include the famous chef/cookbook writer Charles Trotter. She is the executive chef at Vermilion, the fusion Latin-Indian restaurant in Chicago.

She continues, "They had this attitude, Let us see how long she will last here. I was working in a kitchen of 60 to 70, and I would be the only female cooking. I had studied at a top school and yet a lot of people said, 'Ah, you're a girl, you will get married soon and go away.'"

They gave her the smallest tasks she remembers. "For a week all I was doing was cutting onions, but I did not give in," she continues. "I was like: Fine, give me more onions."

Chauhan came to America because she was convinced she would find freedom and a chance to experiment here. "Everything was very set over there, though things have changed dramatically in the last few years," she says. "Many chefs had this attitude then: This is Indian food, this is how you make it and no changing."

Studying at the Culinary Institute of America made her a real chef, she says, although she acknowledges learning quite a lot working in Indian restaurants in India.

"My experience at the CIA was so much more than learning how to bake or how to ice a cake; I learned a culture and the work ethic of being a professional chef," she explains.

"It was amazing being under one roof with about 3,000 other students and faculty who were as passionate about food as I was and am. I learned how to look at food from both an artistic eye and from a scientific eye, how flavors complement each other, about the harmony in the diversity of flavors. And all these valuable lessons are what have formed my foundation."

"And, of course, the most important lesson is no matter how big the roadblock we have to work around it and always produce results. There is always a way; all you need to do is stop for a minute and think."

Chauhan who graduated from India's WelcomGroup Graduate School of Hotel Administration, at the top of her class, says the tougher the work milieu was, the more resolute she became. She continued her professional journey at the Culinary Institute of America where she underwent an intense 15-month course. She was spotted by Vermilion owner Dr Rohini Dey while working at a Chicago restaurant after doing a stint in a New Jersey Indian restaurant.

"Today I can tell other women, especially Indian women, that if they are firm in their passion, they can take the heat anywhere," says Chauhan who supervises a kitchen of 20 people.

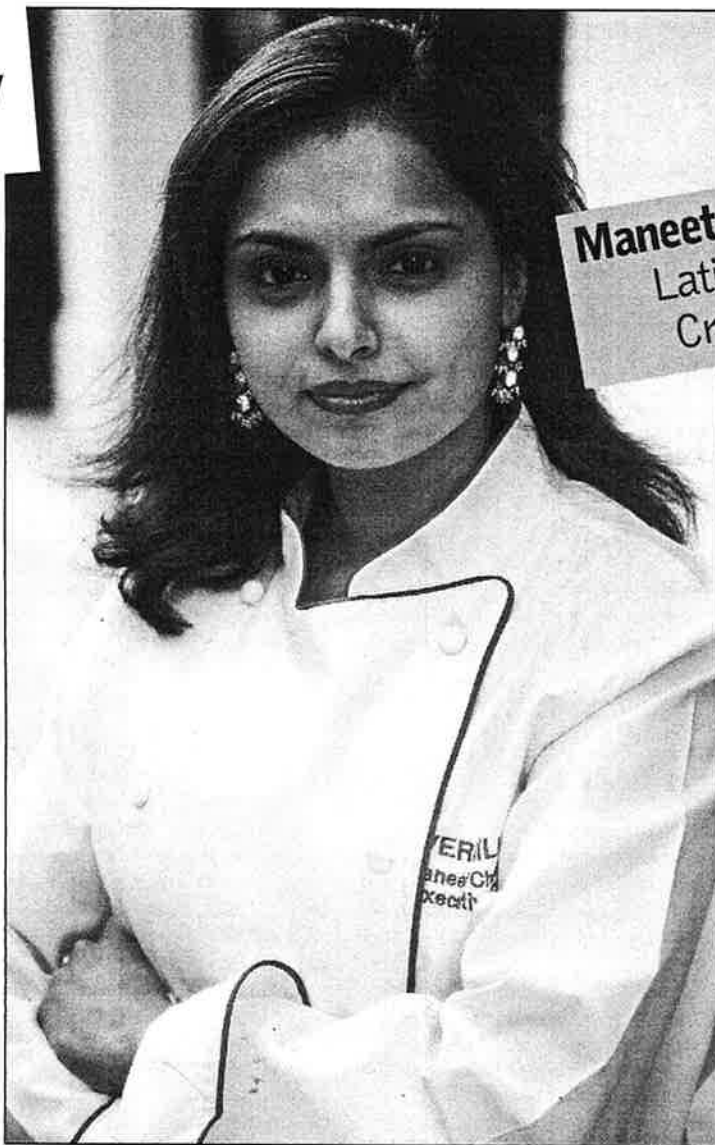
"I chose an unconventional career path in India where the norm was to become a doctor or an engineer," she adds. Her father, an engineer with the Steel Authority of India in Ranchi, Jharkhand, knew her passion for food. He thought she wanted to be a hotel management expert but he soon knew her heart was in the kitchen.

"I grew up sampling the best of the Indian food from all over India," she says. "SAIL had officers from all over India and many of them had wives who were such fabulous cooks. There were times I would pretend that my mom, who is a fabulous cook, had not prepared anything at home so that I could eat what my friends' mothers had cooked."

There were occasions when she took food she had cooked to her friends, with the blessing of her mother. "When my friends fell in love with what I was bringing from home, I began to think of a career in the food world."

The quality of Vermilion cuisine and the women-led team have received extensive coverage in *Travel & Leisure*, *Bon Appetit*, *USA Today*, *Wine Enthusiast*, *BusinessWeek*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and *Fortune* since the restaurant opened five years ago.

'Machismo may fuel the majority of the restaurant world,' wrote the venerable James Beard Foundation, while inviting Dr Dey and Chauhan to cook at a special event in New York. 'But in Vermilion's corner of Chicago, a predominantly female staff runs the show, drawing ener-



Maneet Chauhan discovered the joys of mixing Latin and Indian cuisines

gy and inspiration from divas and deities. The goddesses must be smiling — Vermilion and its "dazzling" cuisine have won countless raves, including a "Best New Restaurant" nod from *Chicago* magazine.

Among the dishes that drew attention at Vermilion was Blue Corn Crusted Scallops on a Kali Mirch Calabaza with goat cheese purée.

Chauhan says that many people do not realize how many common things exist between Indian and Latin food. "Banana leaves are Indian and Latin," she says. "They're used for plates and steaming."

She explained to *Culinary Trends* recently, "There are a lot of overlapping spices — ginger, cumin and coriander. Take the Malabar crab cake. Crab cakes do not exist in India but making them with coconut, green mango slaw and Indian spices created the fusion."

She told *India Abroad*: "Our Spinach-queso Empanadas are seasoned with fenugreek, a typical Indian spice. The Empanadas are served on a bed of jicama, tomatillo and coconut with mango-coconut chutney and saffron oil. Empanadas are definitely Indian. Plantain Koftas (dumplings) are fried and come with a date/pomegranate sauce. Plantains are Indian and also very Latin."

Culinary Trends wrote, "Ethnic cuisines have gone mainstream in American dining. Dishes and ingredients that were exotic a few years ago are ubiquitous and familiar (think chipotle chillies, mango salsa, wasabi, ceviche, etc). But chefs in Chicago have elevated the genre to fine dining and added a dollop of originality. Balancing a respect for authenticity yet appealing to Midwestern tastes, they add an exciting new element to Chicago's vibrant dining scene. Three in particular — Chef Maneet Chauhan of Vermilion, Chef Gene Kato of Japonais and Chef Chan Lee of Le Colonial are interpreting their cuisine in new and unique ways—winning media attention and enthusiastic guests."

Chauhan also teaches cooking and spice classes at Vermilion as well as Sur La Table, Whole Foods and the City of Chicago. She has also led Vermilion to host three James Beard dinners at the Foundation House in New York City.

Recently she designed the menu for business class passengers on flights from Chicago to Delhi. "I'm delighted to introduce the vibrancy and bold flavors of Indian cuisine to American Airlines guests," she said "While Vermilion is known for its unique Indian-Latin fusion, these authentic Indian creations and their eclectic accompaniments that we've crafted exclusively for American go beyond the stereotypical Indian fare found outside of India." ■

Ingredients

3 tbsp extra-virgin olive oil
 1/2 medium white onion, thinly sliced
 1 clove garlic, minced
 1/2-inch slice ginger, peeled and minced
 1/4 tsp cumin or jeera seeds
 1/4 tsp whole black peppercorns
 2 small whole red chilies, stem ends removed
 2 poblano peppers, seeded and chopped
 1 small jalapeño, seeded and minced
 1/4 tsp chilly powder
 1/4 tsp ground cumin or jeera
 1/4 tsp ground coriander
 1 tbsp tomato paste
 1/4 pound fresh lump crabmeat
 1/2 cup small yellow or pink lentils
 3 ripe tomatoes, seeded, peeled, cored, and chopped
 Fish or vegetable stock, or water
 2 tbsp fresh cilantro, chopped
 2 tsp kosher salt
 Freshly ground black pepper

For the garnish

1/4 pound fresh lump crabmeat
 Juice of 1/2 lime
 1 tbsp fresh cilantro, chopped
 1 tbsp fresh poblano pepper, minced
 Pinch of salt
 Freshly ground black pepper, to taste

Method

In a 4- or 5-quart saucepan, heat the olive oil over medium-high heat. Add the sliced onion and sauté for a minute or two until soft. Add the garlic and ginger and sauté for another couple of minutes. Add the cumin seed, black peppercorns, and red chilies and cook, while stirring, for 2 or 3 minutes more. Add the chopped poblano peppers and the jalapeño and sauté until wilted, about 4 minutes. Add the ground chilly powder, ground cumin, and ground coriander and cook until the mixture gives off the aroma of toasted spices. Add the tomato paste and stir to combine.

Stir in the crabmeat, lentils, and tomatoes and bring to a boil. Add the stock, cilantro, and salt. Bring back to a boil, turn down the heat, set the cover ajar, and simmer for about 45 minutes, until the lentils have burst. Using an immersion or regular blender, purée the soup until it becomes a thick, rich bisque. Adjust the seasoning with salt and freshly ground black pepper. Keep warm.

Meanwhile, to prepare the garnish, mix together the lump crabmeat with the lime juice, cilantro, poblano, salt, and pepper to make a light salad. Ladle the hot soup into bowls and garnish with a spoonful of the crab mixture. The soup can also be served chilled.

Maneet Chauhan's Hara Chicken

Ingredients

1 pound chicken breast, cubed
 1 cup yellow onions, chopped
 2 tbsp vegetable oil
 Sea salt to taste

For the marinade

2 cups mint leaves
 2 cups cilantro leaves
 1 jalapeño
 1-inch tender ginger piece
 1 cup unsweetened coconut milk
 2 tsp black peppercorns, ground
 4 tbsp lime juice

Method

Cut chicken breast into small cubes. Blend all of the ingredients of the marinade in a blender. Cover the chicken with the marinade and let it sit for at least an hour (the longer you leave the chicken in the marinade, the bolder the flavor will be).

Heat oil, add the onions and sauté until golden brown, add the marinated chicken. Cook until chicken is done (to make more saucy, add more coconut milk).