

# Hindustani exotica

**Arthur J Pais** meets  
Maneet Chauhan who  
delicately blends Indian  
and Latin flavors

**I**magine starting your dinner with Kumomoto Oysters in Gazpacho Jelly topped with a jalapeño and *garam masala* emulsion, followed by Tamarind Shrimp coated with black pepper and served on mung bean and daikon koshimbir. The Passionfruit Ceviche with its touch of roasted cumin and fresh ginger also demands attention.

January 20, Maneet Chauhan, 27, one of the hottest new chefs in America who has been featured in *USA Today* and *Chicago Tribune*, brought some of her signature dishes to New York. She presented them to serious foodies who paid \$95 to enjoy her Indian-Latin fusion delicacies at the James Beard Foundation event. Offered were several of the dishes that have made the 180-seat Vermillion, where executive chef Chauhan whips up exotic meals, one of the most profiled restaurants in Illinois. It was also named *Esquire's* restaurant of the month in May 2004 and one of the top 20 new restaurants in the city by *Chicago*

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magazine in 2004.

Chauhan also introduced to the James Beard guests her grilled Mysore Lamb Chops marinated in a spicy lentil concoction and served on a bed of red onion salad. Nor did she forget the soup, seafood and dessert courses. The Chilpachole de Jafba is one of her proud creations. She insists on using fresh crabmeat and cooks it with lentil into a spicy and creamy Indian bisque.

The concept of fusion food was a natural draw for Chauhan who says she was "born with a ladle in my hand."

"I was exposed to all kinds of food from across India in my childhood," she says as she recalls her childhood in Jamshedpur in eastern India. "And I enjoyed it all." Soon she was cooking at home with the recipes her friends' parents gave her. "I knew I wanted to be a chef at a young age," she says. "My dad had always told me that I could do whatever I wanted, as long as I would be the best in the field."

Chauhan's culinary career began with her graduating at the top of her class from the Welcome Group School in Manipal, Karnataka.

In America, she graduated from the Culinary Institute of America where she was exposed, among other things, to the world of international cuisine and chefs who loved fusion cuisines. She first tried combining Indian and Latin ingredients with her South American cooking school classmates.

Vermillion was founded by Rohini Dey who holds a doctorate in business management science, and was a consultant for the World Bank, and later for McKinsey & Co.

When Dey, who was looking for a creative, dynamic and eager chef, met Chauhan about three years ago in Cherry Hill, New Jersey, where the latter managed a trendy restaurant called Bombay Cuisine, the two hit it off instantly.

Dey has said she had been "deeply disappointed with the Indian restaurants" she had eaten in Chicago and when she met Chauhan, she immediately felt she 'had someone to collaborate on her vision.' She was convinced that Chauhan could make the 'customers awestruck.'

"We knew we could create many things that have not been tried before," Chauhan says. "Creating Indian and Latin cuisine came to us naturally because we were aware that there were many common ingredients in the two cuisines. And yet they had two distinct personalities." Soon she would start testing the recipes she had been working out in her mind. Just about 10 percent of what she and Dey tested over a year's period found a place in the Vermillion kitchen, among them Tamarind Barbecue Baby-back Ribs served on a bed of Sweet Corn Salsa and topped with Yucca Fries.

Then there is her Tan-

doori Skirt Steak served on garlicky spinach with fried plantains. Her seasonal menu includes Moqueca Com Pirao, a Brazilian stew that now comes with an Indian touch.

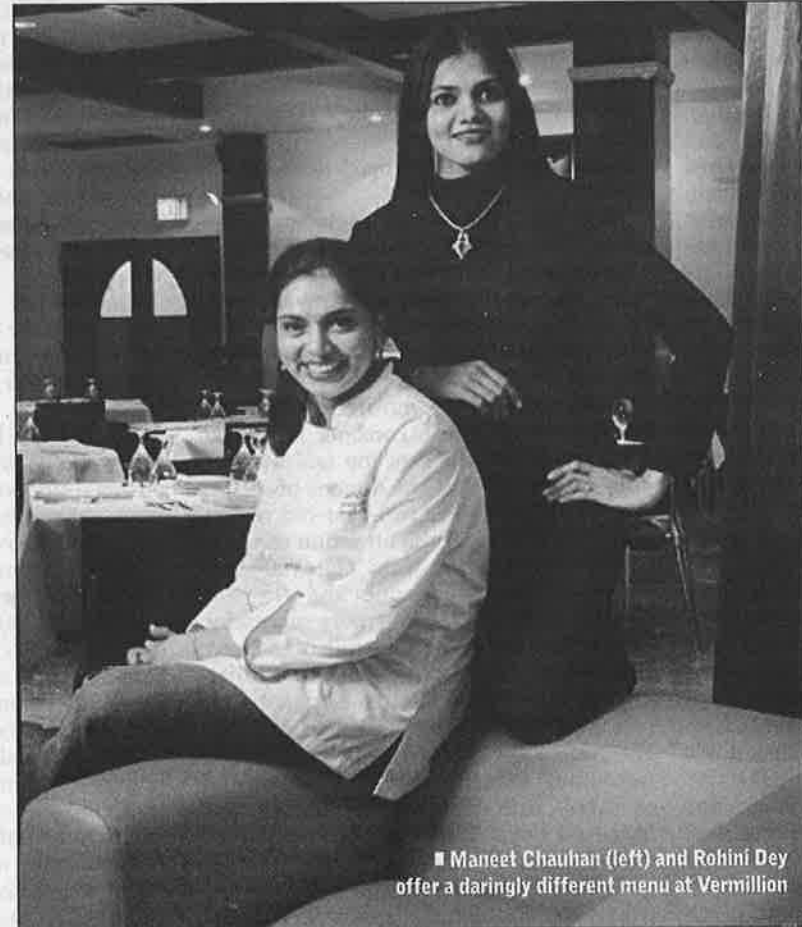
"We aren't just giving Indian dishes a Latin touch or two," Chauhan says. "We

also take a traditional Latin-American dish like Ceviche and transform it into a totally new dish by adding subtle Indian spices and ingredients." One version of her Ceviche comes with a tangy pomegranate and cumin 'liquado,' starfruit and roasted pumpkin seeds.

Chauhan says she was further inspired to create her fusion kitchen when she worked under another young chef, Sumant Das, whose fusion cuisine was a hit at the newly-opened Monsoon restaurant two years ago. With Das leaving the restaurant and much of his creative menu being replaced by more traditional Indian cuisine, Vermillion started getting plenty of notice. But restaurant insiders say even if Das had remained at Monsoon, a new, trendy Indian restaurant in Chicago would have been warmly embraced.

Chauhan says the innovative kitchen at Vermillion hasn't forgotten traditional Indian fare. "But instead of offering the same old tired combinations, we have decided to highlight various Indian regions," she says.

The Kashmir menu, for instance, offers delicacies like Khatti Machali, sword fish cooked in a curry seasoned with *aamchoor* (dried mango powder), *saunf* (aniseed) and *sonth* (ginger powder). ■



■ Maneet Chauhan (left) and Rohini Dey offer a daringly different menu at Vermillion

COURTESY: VERMILLION