

## Monsoon Wedding, Olé!

Cumin, meet coconut. Chili, say *hola* to chutney. The fiery tastes of Latin America rub up against the spices of India to create an international sensation. JENNIFER MURRAY finds nirvana between two worlds.

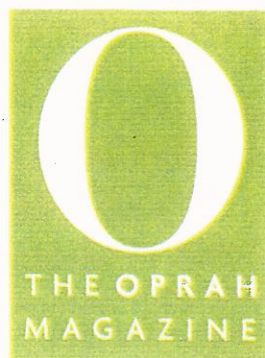
AMERICA ISN'T CALLED THE MELTING POT for nothing: The idea of a glorious ragout of rich, distinctive cultures—and flavors—is what fuels our country's passion for fusion-style cooking. And now, smack in the middle of the heartland, two women born and raised in India are taking that model in original and innovative directions by enlivening dishes from their native cuisine with Latin flavors.

Vermilion, the brainchild of ▶

Rohini Dey, is a sophisticated restaurant in downtown Chicago named after a color that epitomizes the spirits of the Indian and Latin-American peoples. (The word is also a translation of the Hindi *sindoor*, a brilliant red powder Indian women dab on their foreheads in celebration of their femininity and strength.) After being exposed to Latin-American food—Mexican, Brazilian, Colombian—upon her arrival in the United States, Dey realized that there was a natural affinity between that tradition and her own. Both rely upon dynamic mixtures of spices and the creative use of subtropical fruits for their defining character. Dey envisioned a space where food with deliciously unexpected twists—like tandoori-grilled skirt steak with fried plantains, spice-rubbed fish steamed in banana leaves, and empanadas topped with mango-coconut chutney—would capture the essence of both cultures.

She set to work devising a menu with her executive chef, Maneet Chauhan, being careful to preserve the individuality of the two cuisines while exploring their innate compatibility. “I grew up with Indian cuisine, but Latin cuisine was a whole new ball game,” says Chauhan. “I hit the library and started learning about why tapas are called tapas and how they vary from Spain to Mexico. The real challenge here in the States is taking something from your own

Malabar crab cakes with spicy tomato chutney and mango slaw.

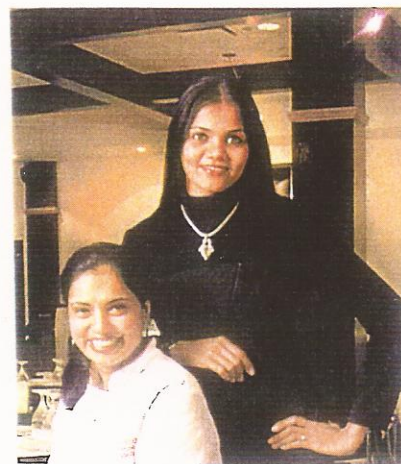


background and combining it with something from another heritage and not killing either entity in the process.”

Chauhan immigrated to the United States in 1999 to attend the Culinary Institute of America in New York and to feed a passion for cooking sparked during her childhood in the northeastern Indian town of Ranchi. “Food has always been the center of my life,” she says. “When my mother returned home around 3 o’clock from her job as a school principal, she began preparing dinner. There was a small ledge next to the cooking range, and I would sit right there next to her, fascinated by what she was doing, and ask questions about why she used certain spices or combined things the way she did.” Now, on any given night, you’ll find Chauhan in the Vermilion kitchen preparing dishes as inspired as baby back ribs smeared with smoky tamarind sauce served alongside yucca fries; spicy mint chicken over Peruvian mashed potatoes; and cheesecake spiked with cachaça (a Brazilian brandy), mint, and lime, then baked in a honey-coconut-pecan crust.

Dey, too, arrived here with an appetite for education and gastronomic adventure inspired by a relatively liberal upbringing in her native state of Bengal. “My mother listened to Alice Cooper and David Bowie in the sixties, and it was rare in India for a woman to do that,” Dey says. “Mom is a fabulous traditional Indian cook, but she also experimented with spaghetti and scones, and that made me more receptive to all kinds of cuisine.”

Dey’s interest in non-Indian fare blossomed into a full-blown obsession when



she moved to Dallas 14 years ago to work on her doctorate in business management at the University of Texas and later to Washington, D.C., as a consultant for the World Bank. Searching for new ethnic restaurants exposed her to the intricate patchwork of American society. “I went berserk sampling African food, Peruvian food, everything I could get my hands on,” she says. “I mean, the first time I had Sri Lankan food was here, and Sri Lanka is an island at the southern tip of India!”

At the same time, Dey was distressed by the bum rap that Indian food—too often associated with over-spiced, greasy dishes and tacky restaurants cluttered with Christmas lights and gaudy statues—couldn’t seem to shake. “I was appalled by the way we lagged behind the Chinese, the Thai, the French, in introducing our cuisine to the United States,” she says. Dey wanted to give Indian food a refined, creative image with a kitsch factor of zero, and that meant breaking with tradition. “Of course, when Maneet and I talked about interweaving Indian and Latin-American food, there were people who said, ‘Why mess with two wonderful cuisines? Why not just leave them as they are? Indian food has so much to offer; why are you going down this path at all?’ But Americans are so receptive to new ideas. If we didn’t experiment, we’d all be eating the same dishes as our ancestors.”

There’s no risk of that happening with Dey and Chauhan in charge. Whether it’s a festival night, when their menu salutes Brazilian carnival dishes, or an average Wednesday evening, when the aromas of coconut-curry crab cakes and mango-cardamom flan fill the dining room, the women of Vermilion have done it: One plate at a time, they’re putting the best qualities of two vibrant cultures—passion, innovation, pleasure—on the table. o

August 2005