

Vermilion:

Indian Roots Grow Latin Connections

Vermilion Restaurant
10 W. Hubbard St.
Chicago, IL 60610
312-527-4060
vermillion10west@beglobal.net

Owner Rohini Dey
General Manager Vivek Deora
Seats 140 dining, 40 lounge
Employees Management 3,
kitchen 14, dining 16, bar 2
Gross Annual Restaurant
Revenue \$2 million
Executive Chef Maneet
Chauhan
Food Style Indian-Latin fusion
Average Dinner Check \$60
(with wine)
Average Number of Dinner
Covers 125
Gross Annual Food Revenue
\$1.3 million
Beverage Manager Vivek Deora
Gross Annual Beverage
Revenue \$0.7 million
Wine Directors Rohini Dey and
Maneet Chauhan
Wine List Focus Latin boutique
wines
Wines on List 46
Wines by the Glass 22
Bottle Price Range \$32-\$90
Gross Annual Wine Revenue
\$350,000



Take ONE determined,
talented woman . . .

Better yet, take TWO determined women
with complementary talents—one an
entrepreneur, the other a chef
—and watch as they unfurl a brilliantly vivid
banner and business plan on Hubbard Street, in
the heart of Chicago's restaurant-rich River North
neighborhood. Vermilion is the banner's
color, and also the name of one of the city's most
intriguing dining enterprises.

The women, Owner Rohini Dey and Executive Chef Maneet Chauhan, have successfully launched what is, almost certainly, the only Indian-Latin fusion menu in the nation. "Upscale Indian with a twist," they call their approach. That translates into tastings from the menu that could include Chili Mussels in Coconut Cilantro Sauce, infused with curry leaves and mustard seeds (\$8). Or perhaps a Tandoor-Roasted Skirt Steak with Pico de Gallo (\$23). For a starter, there might be Cumin-Roasted Tilapia with a Hearts of Palm Salad (\$10); to conclude, a Mango Cardamom Flan (\$8). The full dinner menu offers 13 tapas/small-plate selections (\$8-\$12); 15 entrees (\$16-\$32); and six desserts (\$8-\$10).

Vermilion's 46-bottle wine selection includes some novel Southern Hemisphere boutique products (most priced at about three times wholesale). A total of 22 are available by the glass. Meanwhile, the bartenders are kept busy making "Herb & Spice" cocktails (all \$12) with enticing names such as Cucumber Mint Martini and Clove Tamarind Sour. The wines tend toward high acidity, the cocktails to sweetness.

Dey cites three reasons she and the chef, both born and raised in India, chose to create such a distinctive dining experience: for "the sheer joy of creating something new"; to celebrate historic "cross-flows" between India and Latin America; and to take advantage of the many subequatorial



Vermilion Owner Rohini Dey and Executive Chef Maneet Chauhan are united in their intent to avoid clichéd Indian cuisine, yet draw from its vibrant palate of seasonings.

ingredients found in both cuisines. Of considerable importance as well was her sense that Latin food was attracting a larger number of diners across the nation, and the use of Indian seasonings was growing in mainstream restaurant kitchens.

Chauhan's creations tweaked the interest of customers (many of them return diners) to the point that she was able to do a 90 percent menu revision a year ago that was dubbed "the bolder, richer Vermilion." With considerable pride and pleasure the chef says she was able to ignore clichéd dishes from the Indian steam-table repertory. "Nothing was Americanized," she insists. "We did tastings for customers and some media. These helped win support for what we wanted to do."

The Vermilion experience includes (clockwise from top left) a spacious, contemporary interior; a goblet of passion-fruit-marinated ceviche; and lobster made with a Goan sauce and served with coconut rice prepared tableside.

“We did tastings for customers and some media. These helped win support for what we wanted to do.”

—Maneet Chauhan



The Trio of Gazpacho at Vermilion ranges from sweet to spicy, using smoked red pepper, tomatillo, and almonds to define each version.

Risk Management

Although Dey and Chauhan share the same vision for Vermilion, they came to it from very separate careers. Dey had earned a master's degree in economics and a PhD in management science and had worked at the World Bank and the Chicago management consulting firm McKenzie & Co. Her decision, in 2002, to move into something as ephemeral as the restaurant business struck some colleagues as risky, but she had undertaken her own feasibility study, and it convinced her to go ahead.

A year and a half later, when friends congratulated her on the new “baby,” Dey had to discern whether the compliment was directed to Vermilion or to her second daughter, Mehak, born only two weeks before the restaurant's opening. In addition to her pregnancy, it had been a long period of wrenching gut checks. Her business plan for a fine-dining restaurant with a distinctive “fusion” menu that she had sent to 15 leaders of the Chicago Indian business community yielded only one investor, who bought a 5 percent interest. She then turned to former colleagues at McKenzie and did better. Seven of the 12 approached invested \$25,000 to \$50,000. “The success level is much

higher when there's a personal connection,” she observes. “It may make you queasy to approach a friend, but you just have to get over it.”

Frustrated with a bureaucratic and uncooperative Small Business Administration, Dey spoke to seven banks, applied to four, and was accepted by one. The sum, approximately \$700,000, was enough. She had put a lid of \$1 million for mounting Vermilion—far below the industry norm—and “came very close” to meeting that target.

A Plan to Persevere

During the unexpectedly long time it took for the loan to come through, Dey committed to a location, a chef, and interior decoration changes. She wanted, and found, a turnkey restaurant of about 3,500 square feet in a well-trafficked downtown location. “The menu concept was enough of a challenge without adding a distant destination as well,” she confides. Dey steered clear of construction work but did serve as her own decorator. The interior features a vermilion-colored wall, contemporary furniture, and vivid portraits of women by a leading Indian fashion photographer. Add to that a female-dominated serving staff and, according to the chef, “there's a lot of estrogen in here.” Of her aesthetic decisions, Dey explains, “I felt Vermilion should have an ‘adult’ feeling because the food is too complex to attract the young, trendy crowd for very long.”

As the physical space was taking shape, she faced yet another hurdle. “I had a passion for food, but no knowledge of how a restaurant was organized and run,” Dey acknowledges. Visits backstage at more than 50 restaurants (on both coasts as well as in the Chicago area) provided a quick education and even more determination. Nonetheless, for a time it was a tough initiation into the business. “Two months before opening,” she recalls, “I lost the chef I had hired and paid to train. There I was, eight months pregnant with a ten-year lease and no chef.”

Kitchen Counterpart

Then Chauhan appeared. Still in her 20s, the young chef had impressed her teachers at a hotel administration school in India and the Culinary Institute of America in New York with her culinary curiosity, skill, and exceptional work ethic. On a visit to Chicago she was introduced to Dey, who by then had interviewed nearly 40 chefs without finding a passion to match her own. They talked, Chauhan cooked, and “we clicked,” Dey says now, a note of relief still in her voice.

No wonder. Chauhan not only embraces a “contemporary” approach to cooking (“I believe in the root principles of Indian cooking,” she explains, “but I won't restrict myself to traditional ingredients”), but also shares the owner's dedication to the job. Sixteen-hour workdays are not uncommon to her, and she plunges into whatever needs to be done, including taking over the tasks of a no-show dishwasher.

Chauhan monitors food costs very aggressively in an effort to keep them between 26 and 30 percent. “It's tough,” she states. “Our number-one best seller is Lobster Portuguese. It has a food cost of 40 percent. Beef filet and veal are very popular, and also very expensive. So I keep our meat and seafood under lock and key and have the cooks consult me before they throw away anything more substantial than scraps. And if a plate comes back with more than a little left over, I will check whether the portion was too large.”

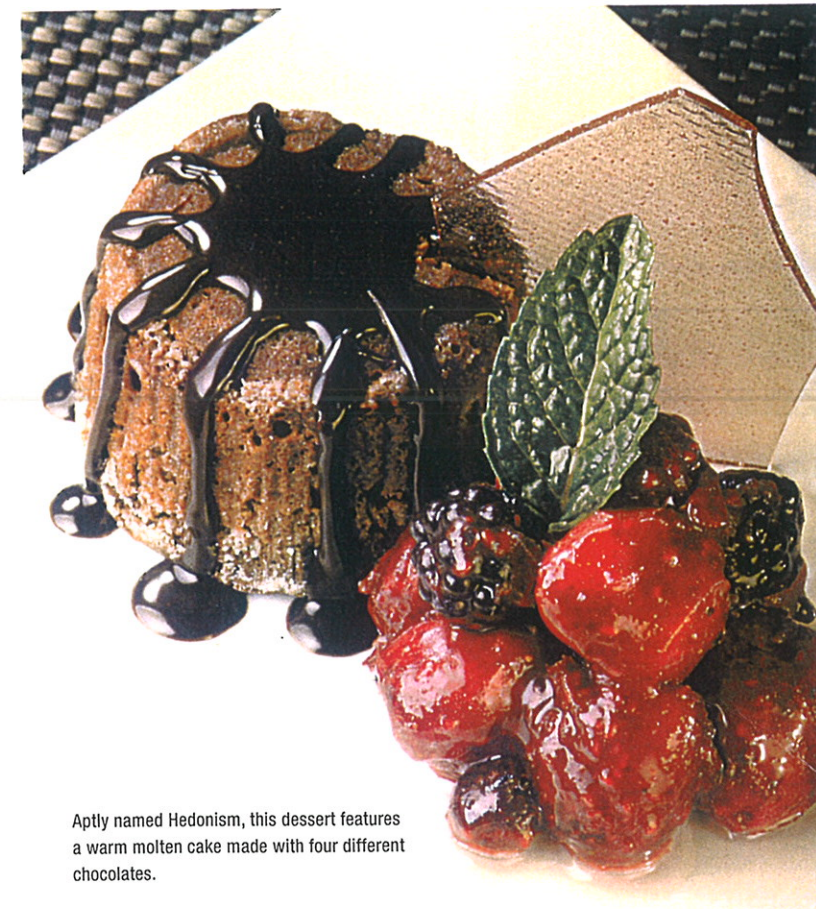
Referring to labor costs, Chauhan comments, “I am caught up in spending time to find ways to save time.” With a chuckle, she cites “improved peripheral vision” that helps her sense who in her kitchen is busy and who is not. Regarding work efficiencies, the chef notes, “I have to pick my priorities. If I chop something in a Robot Coupe instead of by hand, I will save time, but the customer may sense the difference in the end product.”

Vermilion has a single purveyor for meat and another for fish and uses Sysco and some local markets for staples. Vendors are reviewed every six months. Price fluctuations are discussed weekly. Products from India are readily available, but with spices, the chef prefers to grind them herself rather than use packaged imports.

Test, Taste, Train

With Dey's experience in the corporate world, it's no surprise that considerable attention is paid to staff training and performance. Newly hired cooks and servers receive copies of a detailed training manual. Kitchen personnel are cross-trained because Vermilion is a seven-days-a-week operation. Some of them join front-of-house workers on Friday afternoons for a weekly meeting—with tests—where staff are “aggressively” trained in food and wine menu language. Goals are set. Rewards are given. They learn how to pronounce names of dishes and ingredients and are asked to smell and taste them as well. If waitstaff fail to commit to the training and the work ethic within a month, they are requested to leave.

“Tasting is both challenging and stimulating,” says Vivek Deora, general manager of the restaurant. He supervises the dining room, the bar, and wine and spirits logistics. “Our customers tend to be food- and wine-knowledgeable



Aptly named Hedonism, this dessert features a warm molten cake made with four different chocolates.

but may not be familiar with our selections,” he explains. “It insults them and leaves them adrift if their server is uninformed and inarticulate.” Servers at Vermilion do not pool tips, fanning sparks of competitiveness that can work to the restaurant's advantage.

Servers are also expected to relay to the kitchen reactions to food and drinks during the service. This is not done casually. “Feedback” is a virtual mantra here. Diners are invited to fill out comment cards, and much credence is paid to what they write. In some instances, a negative report has triggered an apology or invitation to return for a complimentary meal.

One aspect of the business plan that has fallen short so far is support from the local Indian community. Instead of making up the projected 40 percent of Vermilion's clientele, Indian diners are less than 25 percent. Corporate dining and strong support from “foodies” have filled the gap, but Dey continues to reach out with festive celebrations of Indian and Latin holidays, fashion shows, and a variety of cultural events.

Nor is she standing still. In March, following a successful dinner presentation at the James Beard House in New York City, Dey flew to Bombay. “I'm thinking of expansion,” she explains, “and the restaurant scene in India is evolving rapidly.”

If she moves ahead with this ambition, Dey is clear that it will be different from Vermilion. “I will not do fine dining. I would offer quick food—quick and casual,” she declares with her trademark optimism, “but something with oomph!”

► William Rice, a Chicago-based freelance writer, was the principal food-and-wine columnist for the *Chicago Tribune* for 18 years. Previously, he was editor-in-chief of *Food & Wine* and the executive food editor of the *Washington Post*.