

FLAVOURS OF FUSION

Flickering candles throw muted shadows into the large, L-shaped room, while long, cylindrical, creamy tubes glow luminously from the ceiling. A vermilion coloured wall contrasts sharply with the contemporary, minimalist interiors. Stunning images of models smile invitingly down from the walls, their beauty crystallised for posterity by photographer, Farrokh Chothia whose signature black and white nudes and fashion images give Chicago's Vermilion restaurant a certain *je ne sais quoi*.

Run by Rohini Dey and chef, Maneet Chauhan, Vermilion redresses the lackadaisical preparation and poor presentation that so often characterises Indian cuisine in the US. The food is a melding of Indian and Latin flavours, and the preparation has caused a spicy buzz in Chicago's downtown River North location, which is a food, and art and culture district. Dey, a fusion fan who previously worked at McKinsey and Co., came up with the concept for the eatery. Chauhan, 27, wields a spatula with an expertise that far belies her age.

Dey named the place Vermilion because she wanted a name that signified both femininity and Indianness. A great believer in empowering women, she runs a largely female ship. Her philosophy is simple: expose the Americans to everything that is contemporary and uber-stylish about India's food,

Indo-Latin à la carte is served against a backdrop of contemporary Indian imagery.... **Rukhmini Punoose** savours the tasteful ambience at the Chicago-based VERMILION restaurant

décor, art and artists.

Step inside, and you're almost immediately in the bar, an area outfitted with sleek Italian sofas, soft leather chairs and low-slung coffee tables (a set up that makes waiting for a table significantly more agreeable than that up-against-the-wall interlude we've all been through elsewhere).

Free of the stereotypical ethnic touches (read mirror work, throws and cushions, paintings of elephants or the Taj Mahal) that mark even the most upscale Indian restaurants abroad, Vermilion could as easily be a sushi bar in Barcelona or a tapas bar in Kyoto. Also, instead of the maroon napkins and uninteresting tableware you find at most curry houses, Chauhan's creations look like miniature art forms framed on square, pearly white plates.

Fusion, as a whole, has a tendency to go awfully awry. At Vermilion, while the ingredients and structures of various dishes overlap (plantain *koftas* seasoned with cumin with a date pomegranate sauce, Latin American *uka* potatoes cooked with *garam masala* and *dhania* and served as a cake), Chauhan seems more intent on celebrating the two cuisines than on fashioning a hybrid.

The light, summery 'Agua de Jamaica', a tangy ginger and hibiscus petal drink steeped in mint, or the alcoholic 'Vermilion Sol', with its flushed pink blend of guava and tequila, is a good way to begin a meal, accompanied by the 'Grape Delight', tiny, unassumingly



speckled balls of spicy nuts and cream cheese, with a core of crushed grapes that just melt on your tongue. Another must-try is the 'Verdant Salad', a tossed bed of greens with slivers of sweet, piquant mango rolled up in a cone-shaped *papad* and served with a ginger-mango Moho dressing.

Amongst the fusion entrées, the delicately spiced 'Paneer Pilaf' on a bed of smooth, creamy semolina, is easily one of the best vegetarian dishes on any Indian menu in the US. The char grilled, smoky flavour of the *paneer* hits notes on the palate that have rarely been struck. The subtly spiced 'Lobster Portuguese' is served on a saffron *idli* with a dash of mint chutney. The 'Tamarind Glazed BBQ Ribs' are so succulent and tender; the meat just falls off the bones! You would swear it had been marinated for a year. And for a fitting finale, don't miss the hot, creamy 'Orange Bread Pudding', tinged with Cointreau and orange sauce.

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