


Old to New

INDIAN-AMERICAN
CHEFS ARE UPDATING
THE CLASSICS
FOR MODERN TASTES

by **Gabriella Gershenson**

More than 10 years ago, when Troy MacLarty started writing his business plan for Bollywood Theater, his Indian street food restaurant in Portland, Ore., he got cold feet. “I didn’t have any good models in Portland to see that it could be successful,” says MacLarty, a veteran of Chez Panisse who had specialized in Italian cooking, but fell in love with Indian food along the way. Reassurance came in the form of a visit to Meherwan Irani’s Chai Pani in Asheville, N.C. “It was nice to see a restaurant that was doing well in a community that didn’t seem like it had a large Indian clientele. It gave me more confidence.”

Today, there are two outposts of Bollywood Theater in Portland, and they are in good company among a growing number of restaurants that are reimagining Indian cuisine in America, raising creativity to new heights and introducing fresh ideas to the culinary conversation. For MacLarty, that means adapting street snacks he’s encountered in Mumbai, Kolkata, and Delhi to his farm-to-table sensibilities. He makes every component of his popular kati rolls—meat or paneer wrapped in a paratha—from scratch, selling about 60,000 of them a year. “We were rolling out parathas by hand for two years until we got to 450 a day and I started to look like a line-backer,” he



**Chicken Tikka
Poutine, \$16,
Pawan Mahendro,
Badmaash,
Los Angeles.
RECIPE, p. 73.**





laughs. “Then we got a sheeter.” He also makes his own paneer for the paneer kati rolls—so much of it, in fact, that the restaurant is one of the biggest cheese producers in Portland.

“When I was cooking Italian food, I remember being proud if there were four pristine ingredients well done,” says MacLarty. “With Indian food, I have to do that with 65 ingredients.” The challenge, he says, is getting consumers to stop viewing Indian food as a cheap eat. “The public doesn’t want to pay for Indian food

what they would pay for Italian food,” notes MacLarty, who charges \$11.50 for a kati roll (recipe, plateonline.com), and has only one menu item over \$20. “I would like to think chefs at my level are starting to change the conversation.”

For Cheetie Kumar, the chef/co-owner of Garland in Raleigh, N.C., Indian cooking is just one aspect of a varied palette of flavors and techniques. She takes her cues from the culinary heritage of the South, as well as the cuisines of the spice route. “The official tagline is ‘locally sourced

Indo-Pan-Asian,’” says Kumar. “It could also be called ‘the migration of coriander.’” Kumar, who lived in the northern Indian city of Chandigarh before moving to the Bronx, has long called Raleigh home.

With her cooking, she draws connections between seemingly disparate cultures. “It makes sense to me using North Carolina ingredients, because the produce here is similar to what I grew up eating in India,” she says. The overlap is compelling—think mustard greens, turnips, okra, eggplant, tomatoes, peanuts,



Tandoori Poussin, \$25,
Cheetie Kumar, Garland,
Raleigh, N.C. RECIPE,
plateonline.com.

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"It's like roast chicken and gravy—it's kind of Southern in that way," she says.

For Chintan Pandya, chef of Adda in Queens, N.Y., his radical act is to stick as close to tradition as possible. He's working with local farmers who grow vegetables and herbs from Indian seeds, and carefully adjusts the spices he procures in the U.S. to replicate the flavors of the ingredients found in India. "I have to tweak my recipes multiple times to get them right—a chile powder in India is far stronger than a chile powder here," says Pandya.

Other adjustments must be made. For his Lucknow dum biryani (\$25, recipe, plateonline.com), Pandya employs a Korean hot pot in place of the clay pot used in India ("it retains the heat and flavor better"). The dum-style biryani (dum means cooked in its own steam) is his favored style, and is named for the northern city of Lucknow. One key to a successful biryani, says Pandya, is for each grain of rice to be unbroken and distinct. It took him years to perfect his technique: He washes the rice thoroughly, soaks it for at least 30 minutes, par-cooks it "50 or 60 percent," then finishes it in the oven.

to name just a few ingredients. Their uses are equally similar. In North Carolina, you might pair mustard greens with cornbread; in Punjab, the greens are creamed and served with corn flatbread. "I grew up near the foothills of the Himalayas, and here we are near the foothills of Appalachia," Kumar says. "Once you start digging, there are a lot of similarities."

One of Kumar's signatures is her tandoori poussin. Initially, she used chicken thighs in the dish, but found that cleaning them was too labor intensive. She

was intent on using bone-in meat—"that space between the bone and the muscle is magic." Enter the poussin. "There is always a visit to a purveyor or grower that fits in the puzzle," says Kumar. This time it was a local farm that had recently started a poussin program. "I like the bird and their practices. I wanted to find a way to use it, and it eureka-ed itself into existence." Kumar dry-rubs the poussin, chicken tikka-style, and serves it whole with a creamy sauce reminiscent of butter chicken (\$25, recipe, plateonline.com).



Lucknow Dum Biryani, \$25,
Chintan Pandya, Adda Indian
Canteen, Queens, N.Y.
RECIPE, plateonline.com.

"If I cook it to 90 percent, when it bakes it will get mushy," he explains.

Pandya's idea of creativity is figuring out how to make his dishes taste close to the source. "I'm not a big mishmash guy, to be honest," he says, referring to fusion-style Indian cuisine. "When I do something new, it's about how close the ingredients will be to the local ingredients in India."

In contrast, Nakul Mahendro, who owns Badmaash in Los Angeles with his brother, Arjun, and father, Pawan (the chef), is a "mishmash guy." He combines the Indian food he grew up eating in Toronto with Western comfort food. Case in point: Badmaash's chicken tikka poutine. "Our Indian restaurant is not from the perspective of Indian from India, but of immigrant kids," says Nakul. Though Badmaash, which means rascal, takes a

light-hearted approach, Nakul is serious about getting it right. The chicken is marinated for 24 hours in yogurt and spices ("no coloring," he says, referring to some chicken tikkas' Day-Glo hue) and fired up in the tandoor. The chicken is served, along with cheese curds, gravy, and cilantro, over fries that are seasoned with paprika masala and Indian black salt (\$16, recipe, p. 73).

Chefs/co-owners Zeeshan Shah and Yoshi Yamada of Superkhana International in Chicago take a similar reverently irreverent approach to Indian cooking. Shah, whose father is from Hyderabad, learned to cook from his grandmother. "I was in awe of the complexity," he says. Yamada, a New Yorker of Japanese descent, went to India on a Fulbright scholarship to study the cuisine. The two met in 2012, started

to exchange ideas, and ran a series of pop-ups before opening Superkhana in 2019. Their palak pizza is indicative of what you might find on the menu. Yamada borrowed from his experience working at Co., the now-closed pizzeria from Sullivan Street Bakery owner Jim Lahey, who is famous for his no-knead dough. The pizza is based on a no-knead naan seasoned with garam masala, topped with spinach, chile oil, mozzarella, Gruyère, and crème fraîche, and slicked with ghee (\$16, recipe, plateonline.com).

"We're part of a generation with our feet firmly in two worlds," says Yamada. "One in America and one in another country."

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