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**India Ink**

The World's Largest Democracy at a Crossroads

## From Bukhara to Haute Indian in Manhattan

BY SHIVANI VORA OCTOBER 17, 2011 6:55 AM 3

Indian food in Manhattan just entered a new era, with three upscale restaurants, Junoon, Tamarind Tribeca and Tulsi all earning stars in the latest Michelin guide, published this month.

Hemant Mathur, an executive chef and co-owner of Tulsi, was the only cook featuring Indian flavors at the recent New York City Food and Wine Festival Grand Tasting. During the bazaar-like event, chefs from different restaurants hand out samples of their most well-known dishes to hundreds of attendees. Mr. Mathur's savory banana dumplings were crowd pleasers.

He and his partner Dhandu Ram sat down with me during the festival, to talk about what makes their eatery stand apart from the dozens of other Indian joints in town, and what they eat when they're not on the job.

First, though, their backstory:

Tulsi has been a coveted ticket since it opened last January, perhaps because the reputations of Mr. Mathur, 44, and Mr. Ram, 50, span the globe. The men cooked together at the famed [Bukhara](#) in New Delhi in the late 1980s. They kept in touch through phone chats as they both immigrated to the United States and worked at various Indian restaurants in the New York City area. Mr. Ram was at Diwan Grill in Long Island and Yuva in Manhattan, while Mr. Mathur built his name through stints at Amma and Devi, once the only Michelin-starred Indian restaurant in the United States.



Jay Mandall/Hemant Mathur prepares Tulsi's signature lamb chops as Dhandu Ram looks on.

Two years ago, Mr. Ram and his family enjoyed a meal at Devi, and the next day, he felt compelled to call Mr. Mathur to ask if he was interested in joining him to open their own spot. The result of that conversation was Tulsi, where Mr. Mathur "[cooks like a dream](#)," according to this Sam Sifton review. The boite is packed every night of the week and has a contemporary feel with its white color theme and sleek wood furniture. Some of the notables who've filled the tables include PepsiCo Chief Executive Officer Indra Nooyi, United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki Moon, author Salman Rushdie and actors Woody Allen and Kelsey Grammer.

**Q.** What is Tulsi striving to be?

**HM:** We want to serve haute Indian cuisine in an upscale ambiance and with the best ingredients. We only use fresh seafood and source our meats from Pat La Frieda (a well-known butcher). The chicken is hormone-free and the lamb comes from Colorado so it is top of the line. We also get daily deliveries of produce.

**DR:** The restaurant has some storage space, but there are not rooms and rooms here to store ingredients like some Indian restaurants can have because we want to use the freshest food possible and don't want it lying around for a long time.

**Q.** How is Tulsi different from other fine-dining Indian places?

**HM:** Definitely our chaats (Indian street food and snacks). We do some very unique interpretations of street food. We've done sweet potato chaat, for example, and right now we have an avocado chaat with chunks of avocado, rice puffs, onion, tomato and mustard oil.

Our desserts are also different, and we make a point of emphasizing them instead of them being an afterthought, like they can be at Indian restaurants. (The executive pastry chef is Mr. Mathur's wife, Surbhi Sahni). Surbhi uses Indian flavors in American favorites like in mini-cupcakes, which have a touch of garam masala. And there is a panna cotta which uses the pulp of Alfonso mangoes from India and a raspberry kulfi with chocolate sponge cake.

**Q.** What are some signature Tulsi dishes?

**HM:** Definitely our lamb chops, which are marinated in yogurt, mace and cardamom and grilled in the tandoor.

**DR:** Also our banana dumplings, which are a twist on traditional kofta. We grate plantains, mix them with ginger, cilantro, chili, figs and cashews and serve them in a tomato, fenugreek sauce.

**Q.** Your restaurant presents Indian food in a sophisticated way. Do you feel like you're taking a risk by not offering many of the dishes that non-Indians associate with Indian food, like tandoori chicken?

**HR:** Indian chefs used to think that if you don't have dishes like chicken tikka masala or lamb rogan josh on your menu, you really don't have an Indian restaurant, but that perception is changing thanks to more fine-dining Indian places in the city, like Junoon, Tamarind and ours, which all offer inventive takes on the cuisine.

**DR:** That said, we do have some classics like butter chicken and rogan josh made with goat instead of lamb. We're also open to making dishes on request, so if someone really wants a simple dish like saag paneer, we will cook it for them.

**Q.** Have your diners been mostly Indian or non-Indian?

**HM:** More than 65 percent are non-Indian.

**Q.** What dishes do you make at home?

**DR:** I like to take a break from the kitchen so my wife cooks. I love her food like rajma, goat, chicken biryani, saag paneer and kadi.

**HM:** My wife also cooks and sticks to mostly vegetarian dishes like bindi and beans aloo.

**Q.** Where do you go when you're eating out?

**HM:** Saravana Bhavan in Curry Hill for South Indian food and Sripriphai Woodside, Queens for Thai food.

**DR:** I won't eat Indian food out at all because I prefer my wife's cooking, but we do go to different Thai restaurants. I don't really have a favorite one and like trying new places whenever I can.