

## **This Indian restaurateur owns 5 eateries, including 3 in Curry Hill**

By Gary M. Stern  
Correspondent, New York Business Journal  
Feb 13, 2017, 2:15am EST

Owning one eatery in New York City can be a) exhausting, b) difficult, c) stressful, d) all of the above.

This might explain why most Indian restaurants, like other cuisines, are independently-owned. One is more than enough of a challenge for an owner to keep thriving.



But not for Hemant Mathur, the chef-turned-entrepreneur who co-owns five Indian eateries with three investors for the company he runs, Fine Indian Dining.

In the Curry Hill or Indian district of Manhattan near 28<sup>th</sup> Street and Lexington Avenue, Mathur wields considerable influence. Three of his eateries, Dhaba, Chote Nawab and Sahib are located within two blocks of each other, but Chola is situated on East 58<sup>th</sup> Street and Malai Market is on the classic East Village block of Sixth Street between Second and Third Avenue, where there are a slew of Indian eateries.

Making his multiple eateries moderately priced, appealing to New Yorkers' tastes, and having a commissary to cut down on food prep all contribute to making his stable of Indian eateries successful.

In fact, Fine Indian Dining has 102 employees in the five restaurants, and Mathur is planning on expanding his number of eateries in the not-too-distant future, likely 2018.

## Quality, consistency, affordability

Mathur who turns 50 years old this year and resides in Jackson Heights, Queens with his wife, who is also a chef, said there are no mysteries why his stable of five eateries has prospered. “The key is the food must be consistent. Quality is number one. And it’s affordable,” he said.

At the Curry Hill trio of eateries, couples can dine for \$70 with a drink, and by Manhattan standards that is moderately-priced.

Moreover, Mathur prepares the food to appeal to the taste buds of New Yorkers. “People don’t like their Indian food too hot. It can’t be too spicy,” he said.

Mathur has one another secret ingredient: a commissary located in Yonkers, N.Y., where all the basic food preparation is conducted. “That makes our life easier,” Mathur admitted. Nonetheless, individual dishes are prepared at each particular eatery.

Mathur can’t be at all five eateries at any one time, obviously. Nonetheless, most days he manages to visit four of the eateries a day. He’ll start his day at Chola on East 58<sup>th</sup> Street and then work his way downtown to the Curry Hill district and stop at each of the three cafes located there.



Biryani from Chote Nawab

## Different specialties

But don’t the three restaurants in Curry Hill cannibalize sales? Mathur said that each restaurant has its own specialty and they aren’t in competition with each other.

Dhaba, for example, specializes in Punjabi food, Sahib in Northern and Southern Indian food, and Chote Nawab in Andhra and Lucknow cuisine. “Each has different menus and they don’t compete,” Mathur said.

Despite his many successes, Mathur is closing down a fourth eatery around February 11 in Curry Hill, Haldi. “Business wasn’t great, and labor costs were high,” he said.

Mathur started as a chef on East 22<sup>nd</sup> Street at Tamarind in 2000. He moved to Devi in 2007, where the owner Rakesh Aggarwal encouraged him and Suvir Saran to acquire the restaurant and become chef/owners. Mathur tapped his family savings for capital to buy it.

To acquire the other eateries, Mathur established a team of three investors who were bankers and eventually became friends.

To appeal to a wide audience, some of the eateries serve American staples, which are prepared in an Indian style. For example, he prepares lamb chops but grills them in a tandoor, an old Indian style of preparing warm meals. Other popular dishes include chicken tikka masala, vegetarian cauliflower and fish moille from the South of India.



Left to right; Dhaba, Chote Nawab, Kokum

## Expansion challenges

Many independent retail stores including Chinese restaurants, barber shops and nail salons haven’t “effectively developed a business model to consolidate these fragmented industries,” explained Bruce Bachenheimer, executive director of the Entrepreneurship Lab at Pace University in New York. “The most common reason behind consolidation is economies of scale,” he said.

Moreover, he noted the restaurant business is challenging for individual entrepreneurs to expand. “The restaurant business is extremely competitive and subject to numerous trends and fads. It’s hard enough to manage one, much more complex to keep five thriving,” pointed out Bachenheimer.

Sustaining a loyal staff is another hurdle. “Aside from external factors such as competition and changing trends, high employee turnover is a challenge, attracting, retaining and motivating staff is difficult,” he asserted.

Having several eateries in one location is a way to attract, not discourage, more patrons. “Think about Chinatown or Little Italy,” Bachenheimer pointed out. “Larger numbers of people are interested in going there than would otherwise go to multiple diverse locations,” he said.

Yelp respondents were mixed about Mathur’s eateries. One Yelp client said, “Sahib is one of the finest restaurants in Curry Hill, with very distinct menus, ambiance and excellent service. You can get to try any tandoori items with top notch taste.”

But another Yelp respondent at Sahib who had lived in India for some time bemoaned the lack of authentic flavoring. He was “disappointed by how mild everything was here. But if you’re a vegan, you’re in luck because there is a vegan menu.”

“The next step is making sure all of the existing restaurants are successful. And then I’ll look into opening some new ones,” Mathur said.