

FORK IN THE ROAD

Vancouver's taste of India

Compromise did not fit into Vikram Vij's menu for success

By **STEVE DOLINSKY**
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VANCOUVER, British Columbia — Vikram Vij doesn't have an entourage. There is no publicist, personal assistant or handler. When I make arrangements to meet for our interview, I text him directly. But that doesn't mean the owner of one of Vancouver's most popular restaurants isn't in demand.

Ask any chef in this food-obsessed city about the owner and creative force behind Vij's, and you'll hear pretty much the same themes: humble, generous, tireless. That last adjective is apropos, considering the hectic year ahead for the 50-year-old entrepreneur: judging stints on the Canadian versions of "Chopped" and "Top Chef"; opening a new restaurant in the suburbs; moving his eponymous restaurant into a gleaming new space on its 20th anniversary while turning the original space into something "new and exciting"; and running an upscale cafe and takeout called Rangoli next door, not to mention his ubiquitous food truck.

"I want people to feel like I'm cooking for them at my house," said an animated Vij. "That means no butter chicken and no tandoor."

Vij was born in Punjab, moved to Mumbai as a child and knew at an early age that he loved food and cooking. His grandfather, who encouraged Vikram early on, had suggested he open a restaurant one day "so he could drink and I could cook," he said. At 19, he enrolled in cooking school in Austria ("They didn't require me to speak French") and eventually chased a girl all the way to Vancouver. The girl may have faded from the picture, but his love of cooking only seemed to blossom in the Pacific Northwest.

Working at fancy hotels and upscale French restaurants in the late 1980s, cooking food that was technically sound but had no deep, soulful resonance, it always annoyed him that fellow Indian expats were "dumbing down" Indian by serving the cheapest food in the dingiest surroundings, typically at buffets, he said.

"I knew I had to open my own place, but I was barely 30 and had no money," he



PHOTOS BY JULIA PELISH

Vikram Vij goes over the flavor profiles at his Vancouver restaurant Vij's, but he says the all-female kitchen staff runs most of the operation.



Lamb lollipops are a signature dish at the restaurant.

said. Enter his father. With \$23,000 in cash in his pocket, he made his son a deal: The money is yours; now go find a space. "My first reaction was, 'Papa, how could you walk through customs with that much money in your pocket! You're crazy.' " Vij had saved \$10,000 on his own, so he had enough to buy a ramshackle Lebanese joint in the South Granville neighborhood.

He kept the menu intact, partly because there wasn't enough money to make wholesale changes, let alone print menus. Changes were subtle. "Instead of falafel, we would make

samosas. Instead of doner kebabs, we would make real kebabs, marinated and seasoned like my mother would," he said. It was one of his mother's recipes for chicken curry, in fact, that changed his life.

Near the end of yet another barely break-even day of \$100, a young woman (his only customer in the restaurant at that moment) asked why there wasn't any butter chicken or tikka masala on the menu. This was an Indian restaurant, was it not? Just as she was preparing to leave, "I told her, 'Just try my food. If you don't like it, I'll pay for it,'" Vij said. While the woman

ate, the two talked for a while, Vij sharing his passion with this curious stranger. A few weeks passed, then a glowing review appeared in the *Westender Magazine*.

"Just like that, everything changed," he said. So did the restaurant's name: Vij's (in honor of his grandfather), which eventually moved a few blocks to a slightly larger space. Once Mark Bittman's story in *The New York Times* came out, the lines grew longer still.

One of the things he learned from that initial reviewer was that he needed to spend more time in the dining room, talking to customers and "hand-selling" his food. This was not the cliched British-influenced, red-food-coloring-enhanced buffet people had become accustomed to, after all. It was nuanced. It had depth.

One of his signatures became the lamb lollipops, a gimmicky name to sell a dish that speaks to everything Vij is about: using the highest-quality product from British Columbia (lamb, sablefish, chicken), combining it with a beguil-

ing arsenal of imported, toasted-and-ground spices (cardamom, cumin, turmeric or, his favorite, fenugreek), preparing them with skills learned from years of classic French training, then adding a homemade curry or complex garam masala to elevate everything on the plate. In a different restaurant, those lollipops become grilled rack of lamb over Indian curry with sliced fingerling potatoes.

The line begins shortly before 5 p.m. most days, with people queuing up in hopes of scoring a spot in the first seating. Vij's doesn't take reservations, and it doesn't matter if you're Harrison Ford (who was famously turned away), you've got to get in line like everyone else and put your name down.

The kitchen staff is all female — just by chance, he said, after he assembled the best cooks he could find for Indian food — and they sort themselves out each day. "If they need to hire someone, make a menu change, require new equipment, they just take care of it," he said matter-of-factly. He still goes over the flavor pro-

files, adding a pinch of turmeric, a handful of fenugreek or whatever else he needs to tweak the dish to where he wants it. Once the doors open at 5:30 p.m., he focuses on his customers, walking about the dining room or among the huddled fans outside, offering platters of chaat — tiny crackers laced with sprouted mung beans, fresh mint and mango chutney — or crispy wedges of salt-and-chili-dusted cassava. Cauliflower fritters are another popular item.

The snacks keep everyone in a good mood while allowing the peripatetic owner time to explain the dishes and the provenance of the ingredients. He may not realize it, but he's shifting people's perceptions of what great Indian food can be. And Canadian that he is, he's more apt to let someone else shout about it; he's too busy working.

Vij's is at 1480 W. 11th Ave., Vancouver; 604-736-6664; vijosrestaurant.ca. Entrees run \$24 to about \$30. Visit vijos.ca for information on his other enterprises.

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Monks in New Mexico brew European tradition

By **BOB HOOVER**
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ABIQUITU, N.M. — A parched throat is one of the hazards of hiking in the New Mexico desert. If you're scrambling around the beautiful and empty stretches near this village north of Santa Fe, you might think you've seen a mirage when a brewery comes into view.

It's real. The Benedictine monks at Christ in the Desert, in the tradition of their Old World brothers, started brewing beer in 2006 at a small operation in their desert retreat 27 miles north of here. While small batches are brewed in the desert, the flagship beer, Monk's Ale, is made at a commercial brewery near Albuquerque.

The road approaching the monastery, U.S. Highway 84, is well traveled because it passes Ghost Ranch, the former home of artist Georgia O'Keeffe. Her paintings of the area capture the singular beauty and color of the canyons and creek beds where Christ in the Desert sits in

the Santa Fe National Forest.

There's only a small sign on the left of the highway heading north from Ghost Ranch that points the way to the retreat, up a narrow dirt road rutted and full of gravel that banged against the car as my wife and I innocently set course. We should have expected a bumpy ride because the route is called Forest Service Road 151.

Thirteen miles, bruised tailbones and nearly an hour later, the low adobe buildings appeared in Chama Canyon, seemingly dropped by helicopter into the flat, red-colored landscape. The monastery started in 1964 with architect George Nakashima designing a welcoming chapel that grows out from the canyon wall.

Accompanying the subtle architecture and stark rock walls is a silence that envelopes visitors, aided by the lack of cell-phone reception and absence of machinery. The place runs on solar power.

A layman, Berkeley Merchant, runs the brew-

ing operation, called the Abbey Brewing Co., at both locations. A former executive at high-tech firms in the Pacific Northwest, Merchant said he intended to retire to Santa Fe, but "I've been working on making beer almost since the day I got here."

For more than 1,000 years, Old World monasteries supported themselves and sustained their monks by brewing distinct beers known as Trappist brews. The Benedictine monks at Christ in the Desert decided to follow that tradition to raise funds and asked Merchant to start the project.

"I can say now that it's been the most satisfying work I've ever done," he said.

Merchant brought in Brad Kraus, a freelance beer and brewery designer who installed a new half-barrel system at the monastery in 2011 and devised recipes to make brews similar to the European ones. Five religious orders in Belgium make Trappist beers, while others farm out the brewing to com-



BOB HOOVER/PITTSBURGH POST-GAZETTE PHOTO

The Benedictine monks at Christ in the Desert monastery started brewing beer in 2006.

mercial operations.

Merchant copied that approach by contracting with the Rio Grande and Sierra Blanca brewery in Moriarty, N.M., where the Abbey Brewing Co. maintains its own equipment. He makes specialty beers at the monastery for draft sales only, pointing out that "it's pretty rough getting a tractor-trailer down that road, so we keep it small."

He gets the beer started

and turns the fermentation process over to the monks. Merchant also oversees the small garden where hops indigenous to New Mexico are grown and used in the monastery beers.

Merchant plans to expand the brewery's capacity and install more sophisticated equipment to make it a year-around operation. "We have to shut things down in the summer when it gets pretty hot," Merchant said, so he will add a

refrigeration system in the next year.

Because the monastery brewing schedule is limited, visitors interested in a brewery tour must make reservations well in advance by calling Merchant at 505-670-6802. Check the monastery website, christdesert.org, for information on visits.

It also offers brief accommodations for individuals as well as a gift shop.