

LIVE AT MASALA ART: CHEF MIXES IT UP BEFORE YOUR EYES

RESTAURANT'S SPICE BAR
LETS DINERS FEAST AND LEARN

BY CHRISTINE WALSH
India New England Staff

NEEEDHAM, Mass. - Masala Art Executive Chef Sunil Soni carefully places potato slices around the rim of a large, saucer-shaped griddle, and then slides them with a spatula into a pool of vegetable oil.

Moving quickly to his right, he grabs a frying pan and shows it to the guests seated at the bar before him. He explains that the red sauce is a masala - or mix - of tomato, garlic, salt, poppy seed, cashew and almond paste.

Soni shifts to a third burner, adding a sprinkle of cumin to mint-flavored chicken.

Meanwhile, a waiter brings over little plates of dahi papri chaat, lentil crisps dipped in yogurt with chickpeas, potatoes and tamarind sauce. He explains that this "half-cooked" meal is a favorite among women in rural India.

Welcome to the "spice bar" at Masala Art, the latest, and perhaps most ambitious, venture of Bombay Club owners Vinod and Shikha Kapoor. It's the second suburban eatery the couple has opened this year and their fifth overall.

Meticulously planned, with touches like a large carving of Ganesh and white china made specially in India, Masala Art was a 14-month project. Located in the center of Needham, it has been open since August.

"This is my dream restaurant," said Vinod



Executive Chef Sunil Soni prepares a dish at Masala Art in Needham, Mass. The restaurant's spice bar has brought live Indian cooking to the suburbs.

Photo by MARK TETRAULT

Kapoor. "I always wanted to do live cooking."

To fulfill the dream, the Kapoors hired Soni, a chef who has worked in five-star hotels and most recently opened what he says is the first Indian restaurant on the Seychelles Islands, off the eastern coast of Africa.

As up to nine diners sit at the cane-shaped bar, Soni whips up dish after dish of innovative, gourmet Indian cuisine. All food is made fresh at the bar, where reservations are a must. For \$30 to \$40 per person, guests can choose from vegetarian, non-vegetarian and seafood meals.

On a recent Wednesday evening, with the dining room crowd buzzing in the background, Soni breaks from the fixed menu and cooks a range of cuisine for four diners.

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"Can I make you a vegetarian dish?" he asks politely, before slicing the eggplant, sprinkling it with carum seed, dousing it with lemon juice and the eggplant, sprinkling it with carum seed, dousing it with



Spice bar customers Rick and Julie Shockley of Wellesley, Mass., chat with Masala Art Executive Chef Sunil Soni about Indian Cuisine.

Photo by MARK TETRAULT

lemon juice and coating it in wheat flour. As Soni cooks, Shikha Kapoor stops by to observe.

"All of these spices have health benefits," she says, noting that ginger and garlic are good for the heart, and turmeric is popular in India for pain relief.

"We use a lot of turmeric powder," she says. "It's very good."

Soni serves the eggplant fritters and gets started on lamb khabargha, which is first

cooked in a clay oven and then cooked again on a griddle.

Kapoor explains that Soni makes all of his sauces from scratch early in the day. The sauce for the lambchops includes cashew nuts, onion, tomato sauce, lemon juice, fresh coriander and different types of powder.

"Indian recipes are a mixture of 36 spices," Kapoor says. "There are not necessarily 36 in one dish, but here and

there, we use all 36. It's very hard to make all of these things; it's very time-consuming. But once it is done, it is excellent."

Soni approaches Julie Shockley, who is dining at the bar with her husband, Rick, and asks her to sample the lamb sauce.

"It's perfect," says Shockley, a stay-at-home mother and trained physician who lives in Wellesley.

The lamb is served with a vegetable chaat, which includes sweet potatoes, pineapples, bell peppers, blueberries and lichi.

And then the surprise: The main course has yet to come. These were only the appetizers.

Before long, the diners have before them a plate loaded with a seafood medley of lobster, shrimp and scallops; a mix of mushrooms and peas; black lentil daal; rice; yogurt; and naan.

Rick Shockley, the chief of anesthesiology at Beth Israel Deaconess Hospital Needham (and a co-worker of the chef's brother), has eaten every last morsel.

"It was really quite good," he said about the spice bar. "It's unique to this area. It's an eclectic dining experience."

Referring to Soni, his wife adds, "It's fun to be able to watch him. It adds an entertainment factor to dinner. ... He brings a personality to the restaurant."