
A TASTE OF INDIA IN OJAI

BY PRADEEP KAPADIA

In the commercial Colaba district of Mumbai (formerly Bombay), amid the fancy hotels, upscale Western stores and sidewalk hawkers of tourist junk, there are three unique restaurants.

The first is Indigo, the most famous restaurant in all of India, owned and run by Rahul Akerkar, my friend since childhood. The food is Indian/European fusion, expensive and very, very good. Hillary and Chelsea Clinton ate there. The atmosphere at Indigo is of one big party, with tables commingling, guests trying each others' food, the wine flowing freely. Rahul's signature dishes include beet and coconut Soup, tuna carpaccio drizzled with coriander oil and Mumbai lobster risotto.

The Indian word for authentic is *pukka* and Rahul's food, while exotic, delicate and often sublime, is anything but *pukka* Indian food. For that, you would have to visit the second restaurant, Kailash Parbat. This inexpensive and unpretentious restaurant four blocks away caters to the working people of the neighborhood—store managers, taxi drivers and nontourist shoppers. It serves strictly vegetarian food prepared in the open and overseen by a *maraj* in a *dhoti*. A *maraj* would be the Hindu equivalent of a kosher cook. This is *pukka* food prepared primarily in the Gujrati style—dishes like aloo gobi, mutter paneer, kobi, saag kofta, naan, crisp bhindi (okra) and a rich, foamy lassi to wash it all down with. No one who eats at Indigo would be caught dead eating at Kailash Parbat, or vice versa.

An accidental tourist may have tried both Indigo and Kailash Parbat, but more likely has already eaten at the third restaurant, the world famous Leopold's, located two blocks from the other two. This is the best-known of the traditional Irani-style restaurants, which means it serves all types of food to satisfy all cravings. It's delicious, home-style cooking, from chicken soup to chicken biryani, from mutton curry to lamb chops. It's popular because tourists eating there for decades have vouched for the safety and cleanliness of the food. A *pukka* vegetarian could not eat there because no serious vegetarian would eat in a restaurant where non-veg food was also served (again, think kosher). Leopold's has been around for over 100 years, and every foreign tourist in Mumbai with a \$5-a-day budget for food has eaten there.

On our many trips to India, my wife, Susan, has visited dozens of kitchens in Mumbai and elsewhere, collecting recipes, watching meals being prepared and taking copious notes. In the beginning, it was my mother's kitchen, or that of an aunt or close friend. Back then, she did it to satisfy my own cravings once we got back to the States. Now, it's whichever Indian kitchen she can get an invitation to. When we are invited to a friend's house for dinner in India, it is a foregone

conclusion that until dinner is served, I will be wifeless, and on our way home, I will get an excited earful about the secrets unearthed in that kitchen. Some of her signature dishes pay homage to the kitchen where she learned the recipe: Mrs. Khan's shrimp curry, Philip's dal, Aunt Tarla's mango pickle, Nalini's goodpadi, Naeem's lamb kabab, Anita's stew.

Over the past 25 years, Susan has been obsessed about perfecting every Indian dish she prepares. She has dragged me to Artesia, some 100 miles away, to get the proper ingredient for a particular dish. I have been entertained more than once by the shocked reactions of the Indian grocery store clerks as she proceeds to share with them her recipe for garam masala, or the reason for wanting split channa dal, not split and oiled channa dal. Bias aside, I know of no American who cooks Indian better than Susan, which is amazing in itself because she had never even tasted Indian food until we met.

Our first date was in the fall of 1979, in Cambridge, Massachusetts. I was having my usual craving for Indian food, so I picked a restaurant favored by Indian students at MIT in Central Square. I ordered the lamb saag, aloo gobi, dal, raita and chappatis. In Hindi, I asked the waiter to make it "Desi" style, meaning the Indian way, rich and spicy. I admit I felt like a voyeur watching Susan discover these tastes for the first time, getting all flushed from a sudden rush of masala and fresh green chilis, recovering from the wave with a spoonful of raita, and then doing it all over again. It was as if she understood at once what good Indian food was all about—not just a meal, but a festival in one's mouth, a party for all the taste buds, with a lingering aftertaste that keeps you wanting more. I can't remember what we talked about on that date, but the look of wonder in Susan's eyes and the expressions on her face have stayed with me ever since. Now *that* was a date to remember.

details

Iron Pan

219 East Matilija, Ojai
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Reservations are recommended.

On Tuesday evenings, Iron Pan restaurant celebrates the flavors of India with guest chef Susan Kapadia.

To receive Susan's weekly menu and learn more about the regional dishes of India that are her specialties, please contact her at suekapadia@hotmail.com.