

SHE'S THE BOMBAY CLUB'S SPICE OF LIFE

SHIKHA KAPOOR CREATES THE RECIPES THAT HAVE WON HER RESTAURANTS AWARDS, RAVE REVIEWS

BY CHRISTINE WALSH
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LEXINGTON, Mass. - On a recent autumn morning, Shikha Kapoor leaves the serenity of the small Hindu temple in the yard of her stately Lexington home to greet a guest whom she is meeting for the first time. "Come," she says, leading her visitor through the multicar garage into a living room adorned with striking artwork, family pictures and a big-screen TV. Two hours and a cup of tea later, Kapoor sends her guest off with prasad from her temple, two books on the teachings of Sathya Sai Baba, an invitation to her son's wedding and a salwar kameez to wear to the wedding. It's this kind of treatment that Kapoor extends to customers at the five restaurants she owns with her husband, Vinod: the Bombay Club in Harvard Square, its takeout branch in Quincy Market, Kebab-N-Kurry in Boston's Back Bay, Curry Leaf in Natick and Masala Art in Needham. While Vinod Kapoor runs the business end of the restaurants, his wife is the spice whiz who creates the recipes that have won awards and rave reviews from the likes of Boston Magazine and The Boston Globe. "She is the backbone," Vinod Kapoor says of his wife. "She is very important for her creative and natural skills." The daughter of a very religious woman, Shikha Kapoor begins and ends her days in the temple that she and her husband built five years ago and keep open to the public. "When you come here, you find it very peaceful," she says. "It's away from home - there are no disturbances, no phone calls, and you can sit and concentrate." Each morning, Kapoor spends about an hour and a half in prayer. Then it's off to work. Always wearing traditional Indian clothes, she typically visits two of her restaurants every day but Sunday. She spends several hours at each, supervising her cooks to ensure that the quality and taste of all the food remain consistent. Frequently, Kapoor makes her way through the dining rooms, introducing herself to customers. "In our business it's very important that your food is good," she says. "I go table to table and ask people if I can correct anything. If they are happy, we are in business." On a recent weekday evening, Kapoor approaches a group



Shikha and Vinod Kapoor, sitting in the living room of the Lexington, Mass., home opened two suburban Indian restaurants this year.

of diners at Masala Art. "How's the dessert?" she asks. Within seconds, she's answering questions about the best restaurant and hotel in Delhi. Kapoor was in her late teens when her father died and she left New Delhi to live with her sister, Usha Kamal, in Massachusetts. By day, Kapoor took courses at Northeastern University. By night, she worked in Kamal's Cambridge restaurant, N a t r a j , believed to be the area's first Indian eatery. "That's how I learned cooking," she says. "This became my hobby." In 1977, she returned to New Delhi for her arranged marriage to V i n o d Kapoor. The newlyweds stayed in India for a year and a half, and moved to the United States when their son Sorabh was six months old. Vinod took a job as a store manager for Fayva Shoes, while Shikha worked as a teller at First National Bank. Soon, they bought Kebab-N-Kurry from Vinod's cousin. Right from the start, Shikha

designed the recipes and experimented with new cuisine. The couple could not find anyone with experience working at an Indian restaurant, so Shikha trained new employees. For the first six or seven years they lived in America, the Kapoors pinched pennies, hoping to save enough money to establish themselves. By the time they first returned to India, they owned two restaurants and a home. After several other ventures, the Kapoors opened the Bombay Club in 1991. Within two years, it had established a reputation as one of the area's premier Indian restaurants. In 1994, it won its first of five Boston Magazine "Best of Boston" awards. The magazine's 2000 writeup praised Shikha Kapoor's "experimental recipes," noting her Tangri curry-marinated chicken legs cooked in a tandoor oven with curry sauce flavored with mustard and poppy seeds,

jalapeno peppers, coconut milk and fresh yogurt. This year, the Kapoors took their act to the suburbs, opening the Curry Leaf in January and Masala Art in August. For Shikha Kapoor, who likes to continually introduce fresh items to her menus, the upscale Masala Art was a chance to create 20 completely new dishes. The eight-page menu features a host of vegetarian, chicken, lamb, tandoori, South Indian and seafood specialties. It offers 13 varieties of Indian bread. For Masala Art, the Kapoors hired their first actual chef, Sunil Soni, who has worked at five-star hotels throughout the world. Previously, they only employed cooks instructed to follow Shikha's recipes. Soni says he's enjoyed developing new specialties with Kapoor. "We work together like a team," he says. "She has a lot of good ideas." Kapoor's recipes are influenced by the food she eats on the couple's many travels around the world. "She has a God-given thing, that if she goes to a restaurant and tries something, she can tell what is in there," her husband says. "She can then try it on her own." If Kapoor finds something she likes, she stores the taste in her mind. Developing new cuisine, she says, is a time-consuming process. And new dishes must past muster with regular customers before they make it onto a menu. Kapoor has learned over the years to consider the American palate and make food that is more flavorful-spicy than hot-spicy. A vegetarian herself, she takes care to ensure that nothing that has touched meat comes near her vegetarian dishes. The Kapoors call themselves trendsetters in New England's Indian restaurant scene. They say at least 30 former employees now run their own restaurants. Among the Kapoors' trainees is their eldest son, Sorabh, 25, who has a hospitality and culinary-arts degree from Boston University and has been working in the family business for eight years. He was very involved in the planning for Masala Art and even trained its 27-person wait staff.

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Name: Shikha Kapoor
Age: 50
Born: New Delhi, India
Hometown: Lexington, Mass.
Title: Co-owner of Bombay Club Group of Restaurants
Restaurants: Bombay Club, Cambridge; Bombay Club, Boston; Kebab-N-Kurry, Boston; Curry Leaf, Natick; Masala Art, Needham
Education: High school diploma in India; culinary courses at various U.S. institutions
Family: Husband, Vinod; sons, Sorabh and Rohan