

Guru the Caterer's following has a taste for Indian food

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SOMERVILLE - Four years ago, Guru the Caterer set up shop on Broadway here. The sign read "divine Indian food for brilliant minds" and listed the contact information, but the shutters remained closed most of the time. Meanwhile, a minivan with the same intriguing tagline was zipping around Cambridge making deliveries.

Last summer, another sign finally went up on the Teele Square storefront; it was officially open for takeout. Neighbors who stopped by to sample the caterer's creations - wholesome North Indian food - have been hooked ever since.

Whether you order the standard chicken tikka masala, chunks of poultry in a creamy spicy sauce, or the less well-known meatball-like lentil wadi, all the items on the rotating menu have their fans. Do you absolutely hate okra? The bhindi masala could change your opinion of the slimy vegetable.

Guru is actually Pushpinder Bhetia - "Pushp" to friends. Guru began as a delivery service of box lunches (\$6.50 for vegetarian, \$7.50 for poultry; both include one curry, one vegetable, two whole-wheat chapatis, basmati rice, and a pickle) to biotech researchers, programmers, and MIT students. He has several drop-off points - he needs an order of eight lunches to start a new location - and also provides food for parties. That might mean 100 samosas can be part of someone's festivities. Saturdays, Bhetia cooks dishes from his native Punjab as well as inspired creations - like portobello mushrooms with paneer, an Indian cheese - for his takeout customers.

The self-taught chef has one guiding philosophy: Never compromise on the quality of ingredients. Complex individual sauces for distinct Indian dishes - collectively referred to as curries - are made from scratch every morning in his kitchen. He will not use shortcuts or sauces that he made a day in advance. "It simply doesn't taste the same," he says.

Bhetia, who grew up in New Delhi, was a fashion photographer in India. For photo shoots, he traveled to different parts of his country and often dined at top restaurants as well as roadside eateries. "I love good food," says the caterer, "and I understand it instinctively."

When he moved to Boston, he ran a chain of cellphone stores and realized that the city had few Indian restaurants where he cared to eat more than once a week. So, he decided to set up a business to serve home-style Indian food.

In the waiting area, there are ledges with see-through spice jars and framed pictures of colorful Indian artifacts. "Ikea," he announces matter-of-factly. A tiffin carrier, which is an iconic multi-level steel Indian lunchbox, sits on the counter. "Belongs to an Indian customer," says Bhetia. "Eating out of it reminds him of home."

Bhetia says his customers order box lunches several times a week. In India, many office workers have a hot, home-cooked lunch sent to them through a famed network of delivery men called tiffin-wallahs or dabba-wallahs. Today, of course, these workers have the option of placing online lunch orders with caterers.

The food has universal appeal - 90 percent of the customers are non-Indian. The sumptuous two-dish lunch combo comes with rice and unleavened bread. A mango lassi and saffron-flavored pudding brings the bill to slightly over \$10. "At double the price, this would still be a good deal," says one customer picking up his order.

Jason Pramas, a 41-year-old publisher, makes the trek from Harvard Square for Bhetia's artisanal meals. "When I expressed interest in Indian cooking, Pushp gave me a reading list on the spot," he recalls. He only wishes the place were closer to the T stop.

The caterer is never too busy to greet customers or banter with regulars. The person ahead of me in line is nearly \$1 short. "Just pay me next time," Bhetia says genially.

Guru the Caterer, 1297 Broadway, Somerville, 617-319-4392, guruthecaterer.com.

Palak Paneer

Serves 4

Palak means spinach; paneer is Indian cheese.

3 tablespoons vegetable oil

3/4 pound paneer, cut into cubes

10 ounces fresh spinach, stems removed

1 large onion, coarsely chopped

1 teaspoon cumin seeds

4 pods green cardamom

1 tablespoon ground coriander

1/2 teaspoon salt

1/2 teaspoon paprika

1/2 cup heavy cream

1 teaspoon garam masala

1/4 teaspoon kasoori methi (dried fenugreek leaves)

1. In a large skillet, heat 1 tablespoon of the oil and when it is hot, add the paneer. Cook, stirring often, for 5 minutes or until golden. Remove it from the skillet; set the pan aside.
2. Rinse the spinach and set it, with the water that clings to it, in a saucepan. Cover with the lid and cook over medium heat, shaking the pan several times, for 1 to 2 minutes or until the spinach wilts. Rinse the spinach with cold water and when it is cool enough to handle, squeeze it in your hands to remove the excess liquid. Chop the spinach finely.
3. In the skillet used to cook the paneer, heat the remaining 2 tablespoons oil. Add the onion and cook over medium heat, stirring often, for 10 minutes or until it is golden brown.
4. Add the cumin seeds and cardamom. Cook 1 minute.
5. Add the coriander, salt, and paprika.
6. Stir in the cream and spinach. Heat the mixture until it is bubbling at the edges. Add the paneer, garam masala, and kasoori methi. Mix well. Serve with white rice. Adapted from Guru the Caterer

Credit: Vijaysree Venkatraman Globe Correspondent. Photos by Wendy Maeda/globe staff

[Illustration]

Caption: Above: Pakoras, palak gosht (lamb and spinach), rice, chicken tikka masala, and a chapati (right) from Guru the Caterer.

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Abstract (Document Summary)

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