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Taste the Modern Spirit of India in SoMa

Carolyn Miller McCusker visits San Francisco foodie favorite ROOH.

In San Francisco, we are spoiled when it comes to good food. Whether it's grab-and-go, food truck fare, or fine dining—for delicious food anytime, the city has you covered. But let's talk about the lunch hour. Let's say you decide to take time to do lunch right instead of quickly devouring something on the fly. Yep, depart your desk, walk outside, go to an eatery, and sit and savor the midday meal. I know, it's a novel idea in the fast-paced Bay Area. But on a recent Tuesday, I did just that. I reserved a lunchtime table and jumped at the invitation to try a new eatery in a city that boasts one of the best restaurant scenes in the country.

A friend suggested we meet at ROOH, a modern concept Indian restaurant and cocktail bar in SoMa, (South of Market Street), one of the coolest neighborhoods in San Francisco and a foodie hotspot. At first, I was a little hesitant at the idea of eating Indian food in the middle of the day.

Would a nap be in order after eating what, generally speaking, is considered exotic but heavy and intimidating cuisine? But I left my doubts at my desk, and to my delight, discovered that ROOH's menu is full of surprises. Once my gastronomical journey began, my impression of Indian food forever changed. And that's exactly the point.

"The general perception of Indian food is that it is too heavy or too spicy," says Vikram Bhambhani, who co-owns ROOH with his wife Anu, who manages the restaurant's day-to-day operations. "India is a large, complex country where the flavor of the food depends on



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FOOD & WINE



on the region. We are blending the best of India, the best modern and innovative cooking techniques, and combining it with the best California produce."

The San Jose-based couple, both foodies and former technologists, along with ROOH's talented Executive Chef Sujan Sarkar, are part of the Good Times Restaurant Group, with restaurants in India and England. ROOH is the group's first U.S. restaurant. The trio's goal is to provide a modern interpretation of their native cuisine. They are in good company with other progressive Indian restaurants such as Babu Ji and August 1 Five, also based on the San Francisco food scene.

From the moment I stepped into the sultry jewel tones of ROOH's sophisticated interior, with saffron-colored walls, gold mesh curtains, and a stunning blue bar, I forgot about my tight

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parking meter and "to do" list. I was, dare I say it, relaxed. Within minutes of coring up in a teal velvet booth and settling in with my appetite, I savored the restaurant's sophisticated, casual, happening vibe. The place hummed with hip professionals filling up the roman chairs and digging into pretty plates of food.

The commitment to quality by Chef Sarkar, whose credentials include being named the Times of India's Chef of the Year, and his team of cooking pros from India, is evident in ROOH's new fall menu, an exploration of the bounty of Northern California's local, sustainable ingredients. ➔



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FOOD & WINE



Executive Chef Sujan Sarkar with restaurant owners Vikram and Anu Bhambhani.

Creative dishes appealing to all the senses, from a sa-cha selection to the ever-on-trend tasting menu (RM), include savory butter-but squash and sweet yam maintained with yogurt, chili, and spiced, then grilled and served with burnt, garlic chutney, and herbaceous tomatoes. A tangy combo! The colorful cauliflower kolwada complements the oh-so-tender tandoor smoked pork ribs maintained in pomegranate powder and spices, braised for three hours, smothered with ginger glaze, and served with peppers, green apple, and plum slaw. (7 is die for!) A lighter fall favorite is the butter-poached halibut with the unexpected but delightful tang of rhubarb, curry, and sun-dried tomatoes. "In California, we don't have to work that hard for great flavor," says Sarkar's brother, Chef Pujan, with a nod to the bounty of beautiful dishes decorating our table. "The gorgeous, fresh ingredients are the star."

At 10 on time, a show-stopper dish of delicate fresh uni and gunpowder scallops in a mango-colored sweetcorn curry broth served in the sea urchin's spiny purple shell was delivered to our table. We gasped at this culinary work of art almost too pretty to eat. Almost. "He is a magician," says Bhambhani when asked about Sarkar's artistic and masterful creations. "His cooking techniques brilliantly blend east and west."

That magic isn't limited to food. We sipped sweet, creamy Chai tea harvested in India, and ROOH also offers a complex and daring cocktail menu designed as a wheel with drinks listed in each of six categories: sweet, sour, salty, pungent, astringent, and bitter. And, the impressive wine list boasts 210 labels from around the world. The pride for what the trio has created at ROOH, which translates to "root or origin," is obvious when both Vikram and Anu talk of their mission to share the modern spirit of India with the masses. "Indian food will be mainstream," Vikram promises. "We're happy to convert one customer at a time." •

ROOH, 333 Brannan Street, San Francisco • 415.525.4174 • www.roohsf.com
Open Monday - Thursday, 5:30pm - 10pm and Friday - Saturday, 5:30pm - 10:30pm.
The late-night bar menu is offered Friday and Saturday until 12:30am.

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Creative dishes appealing to all the senses, from a-la-carte selections to the seven-course tasting menu (\$80), include savory butter-nut squash and sweet yam marinated with yogurt, chili, and spices, then grilled and served with burrata, garlic chutney, and heirloom tomatoes. A tangy combo! The colorful cauliflower koliwada compliments the oh-so-tender tandoor smoked pork ribs marinated in pomegranate powder and spices, braised for three hours, smoked with ginger glaze, and served with peppers, green apple, and plum slaw. (*To die for!*) A lighter fall favorite is the butter-poached halibut with the unexpected but delightful tang of rhubarb, curry, and sun-chokes. “In California, we don’t have to work that hard for great flavor,” says Sarkar’s brother, Chef Pujan, with a nod to the bounty of beautiful dishes decorating our table. “The gorgeous, fresh ingredients are the star.”

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