

Passionate *Restaurateurs*

The couple behind Vancouver's renowned Vij's Restaurant share their fresh take on Indian cuisine.

By Mary Luz Mejia



Vij's Restaurant, Vancouver

Vikram Vij and his wife, Meeru Dhalwala

Vij's Restaurant in Vancouver has been described as "easily among the finest Indian restaurants in the world" by New York Times columnist Mark Bittman. Big praise indeed for what started out as a cozy 14-seater back in 1994. Vikram Vij and Meeru Dhalwala are the husband-and-wife team behind the award-winning Vij's and its sister restaurant, Rangoli, a casual lunch and take-out spot. The couple's story is as delightful as their inventive cuisine.

A childhood full of deliciously aromatic Indian meals and colourful trips to Mumbai's marketplaces helped young Vij develop an appetite for food made with integrity. Vij says, "I always loved show business and the idea of being in a restaurant. The cooking, the front and back of the house – it's like a drama,

basically. And my grandfather pushed this idea too – he used to say that I would open a restaurant and that he would be the bartender." The place, his grandfather predicted, would be "something to see."

After completing a Hotel Management program in Salzburg, Austria, Vij moved to Canada in 1989 for a job at the Banff Springs Hotel, eventually making his way to the milder climes of Vancouver. He describes his reaction to the city as "love at first sight." The aspiring restaurateur worked at some of the best dining establishments in the area, including the venerable Bishop's, before deciding it was time to strike out on his own. With \$10,000 in his pocket and a loan from his parents, he launched the first Vij's Restaurant.

Shortly afterwards, he met Meeru Dhalwala, who was working in Washington, D.C., on human rights and international development projects. After numerous telephone conversations (encouraged by their mothers), she bought a ticket to visit Vij in Vancouver.

Dhalwala says, "If I could have written my own Cinderella-like romance, this would have been it. It was a five-day romantic whirlwind, and I was in love."

Vij chimes in, "I told Meeru that I knew from the gut that she was a good investment."

"I'll take that as a compliment," Dhalwala replies, smiling.

"And you should," says Vij.

This easy back-and-forth is a hallmark of Vij and Dhalwala's partnership. The couple, who are also parents to two little girls, liken the operation of their business to rearing kids. "You could say that Vij's is my first-born. There's a lot of passion that goes into running a restaurant like this," says Vij.

Dhalwala adds, "And working together means there's a lot of major ups and downs. The key is to communicate and draw the line as to what each of us does. We both want what's best for the business – it's the same as raising children in a way."

Today, in Vij's larger digs (the restaurant moved to a new location in 1996 and expanded again in 1999), Dhalwala creates and refines the menus, changing them seasonally, while Vij plays the front-of-house maestro. Of her transition from development work to menu conception, Dhalwala says, "I learned on the job with Vikram and his kitchen staff. I landed in this job by coincidence, and I'm proud to say I'm good at it."

So good at it, in fact, that people will wait up to two hours for a coveted seat in Vij's for dinner. To show their appreciation, the couple offers a cup of hot chai (Indian spiced tea) and snacks to guests in the lounge. Once inside, diners are treated to regionally sourced ingredients and a menu that's Indian inflected while very much personally inspired – no butter chicken or tandoori staples here.

"Nobody can label us," says Vij. "There's a lot of inspiration and improvisation that goes into our food. It may be a cold day outside, so you think, 'OK, this curry needs to be a little hotter.' But we don't like to say we're one thing or another. It's just food we like, using some traditional spices and local ingredients mixed with classical French techniques."

Dhalwala adds, "To me it's just delicious and very special."

Special enough to have helped put Vancouver and Vij and Dhalwala's interpretation of Indian food on the culinary map. Vij's grandfather, it turns out, was right – his grandson's restaurant is "something to see," and more importantly, an experience truly worth savouring.

Lamb popsicles



Within the span of a week last November, Vikram Vij and Meeru Dhalwala's bestselling cookbook took the top prize for English cookbooks at the Canadian Culinary Book Awards and won the Cordon d'Or – Gold Ribbon International Cookbook Award. *Vij's: Elegant and Inspired Indian Cuisine* spotlights fresh local ingredients and uses familiar Indian spices in creative ways. Recipes include yogurt and tamarind marinated grilled chicken, portobello mushrooms in porcini cream curry and jackfruit with cayenne and black cardamom.