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Currying flavor with Americans

Sood hopes to establish Gourmet India franchises across the country

By Douglas Belkin, Globe Staff | August 27, 2006

BURLINGTON -- Yogi Sood sits in front of his restaurant in the food court at the Burlington Mall talking strategy with his son. The conversation is not about recipes or vendors or price points. Their recipes already are great, their vendors steady, their prices fair.

Rather, this debate is about the speed at which they should conquer the world. Yogi, a 57-year-old retired engineer and the founder of Gourmet India, wants to do it quickly. Now. Yesterday. "Fifty franchises in five years," he says.

Vishnal Sood, 24, raises an eyebrow. He is deferential to his father but the eyebrow is ominous. Yogi interprets: "My son thinks I'm a bit ambitious," he says. Then he laughs. Perhaps, but to be the Ray Kroc of Indian food -- as Yogi Sood intends -- will take ambition and then some.

Kroc started franchising McDonald's 51 years ago and changed America's eating habits. Sood started Gourmet India 11 years ago and wants to change those habits again. But instead of hamburgers and french fries, Sood wants to sell traditional Indian dishes such as chicken tikka masala and saag paneer.

And not to a few thousand people a day -- as he does now across Greater Boston -- but to hundreds of thousands. From sea to shining sea. And, yes, he wants to do it soon. "This can be a national chain," he says, lowering his voice. "Our food is good; our prices are fair. I don't see why not."

Diners seeking Indian food in the area in the last couple of years are likely to have eaten at one of Sood's five locations -- which stretch from Burlington to Rhode Island. Still, a national chain? "It's a big leap," says Harry Balzer, an expert in the eating habits of Americans. "People's taste changes very slowly."

Sood is nonplussed. Indian food will be to the ethnic food market what Chinese food became 20 years ago, he says. He looks around the mall's food court. Some of the heavy hitters of the franchise restaurant business are his neighbors: Pizzeria Regina, Johnny Rockets, Quiznos. "We're already among the most popular here," he says.

If England is any indication, Sood might be right. Aided by a massive wave of immigration from Southeast Asia, chicken tikka masala has become England's national dish. In many neighborhoods, curry shops have superceded fish and chips.

If Indian food is headed down the same path in the United States, Sood wants to be the man at the head of the parade. Born in Punjab in northern India, he immigrated to the United States as a young man to attend graduate school at Oklahoma State University.

After earning a master's degree in industrial engineering, he worked with Parker Brothers on the North Shore and then at New England Business Service in Groton for 15 years. His weekends, however, almost always were reserved for his passion: cooking.

"It's always been the best way for me to relax," Sood says. "It's where I feel the most at home." Over the years, he honed the traditional recipes his mother handed down to him as ideas of his own restaurant danced in his head. The push to actually open a restaurant came in 1992. During a downturn in the economy, Sood was forced to lay off several of the engineers he supervised. "It was a very traumatic experience," he says.

These people had worked hard for him and deserved better than a pink slip. He made the decision to open a business and create jobs. Gourmet India was born. Four years later, after cashing out his 401(k) and mortgaging his house in Nashua, he signed a \$16,000-a-month lease and set up shop in the Burlington Mall.

The business immediately started losing money. Sood panicked. His instinct: Pull the plug. Vijay Sood, his wife and business partner, was the steady hand. She insisted they stay the course.

"The food is good," she said. "It's just a matter of time."

Then a year after the restaurant opened, the day after Thanksgiving, Sood's aorta ruptured. He was rushed to the hospital. Doctors gave him a 10 percent chance of survival.

"It was stress," said Vishnal.

For several hours, it was touch and go. He was taken to Boston for open heart surgery. After four months of rehabilitation, he was back on his feet and in his beloved restaurant. Within a few more months, he was working his regular 75-hour-a-week schedule. Two years later, for the first time, the business broke even.

"Our customers had to find us," Sood said. "It took some time, it was definitely the hardest period of my life."

In 2001, the Soods opened the second Gourmet India, this one in Coolidge Corner in Brookline. Then a third at the Prudential Center in Boston, a fourth in Providence Place in Rhode Island, and a fifth in the Natick Mall.

In 2004, after Vishnal graduated from college, he joined the family business. September openings are planned for restaurants at the South Shore Plaza in Braintree and the Square One Mall in Saugus.

Annual sales are \$3.4 million. If everything goes according to plan, Sood's eldest son, Ikaas, 29, soon will come on board.

The next step: franchises. The company's tagline: "Not fast food, it's gourmet food fast." The Soods are hopeful, but Balzer, a vice president with the NPD Group, which publishes an annual report that details the eating patterns in America, isn't so sure. The traditional route to success is to sell a slight variation of a food Americans already eat, he says. Case in point: The fastest growing food for the past 12 years in the US is fried chicken and all its variations: chicken tenders, chicken nuggets, chicken sandwiches. Typical Indian dishes are prepared with spices that, to an American palate, shriek the word exotic.

Vishnal Sood, who oversees day-to-day operations, said about 15 of the 350 daily customers in Burlington never have tried Indian food and have to ask about the menu. Still, Yogi insists, they come back.

And what of the Indian food revolution in Great Britain? It was fueled by a much larger immigration of Southeast Asians, Balzer points out. Indeed, in Great Britain, there are about 1.5 million Indians and Pakistanis in a country of 60 million, and most live around London. In the US,

there are about 2.5 million, but they are spread across many cities in a country of 300 million, according to the US Census.

Sood is wise to this but remains both aggressive and confident. He intends to franchise in cities where Indians are clustered. He believes that foundation will support his restaurants while it finds a broader audience.

``The popularity of Indian food is increasing," Sood says, patting his ample stomach.
``The food is good. I think it will work."`
