

HOW TO COOK AN INDIAN CHEF

Cheetie Kumar invented herself.

BY NABEN RUTHNUM

I WANT TO FIGURE OUT HOW Cheetie Kumar cooks carrots. After eating her dish twice—once at Blackberry Farm in east Tennessee, and once at Garland, her restaurant in Raleigh, North Carolina—I ask her straight up, at a strip-mall Szechuan restaurant mysteriously named Taipei101 in the Raleigh suburb of Cary.

“We get local carrots. They have to be local, and they have to be good, fresh carrots. That’s the most important part of it, period. We sear them with a lot of coriander and cumin seed, and cook them in carrot juice and orange juice, with urfa pepper.”

There’s more to it than that, and she’ll soon tell me. I’m asking her about these carrots because I believe that there’s a parallel for Vladimir Nabokov’s comment about writers’ biographies in chef’s profiles. “The best part of a writer’s biography is not the record of his adventures

but the story of his style,” he said, in one of his extremely not-off-the-cuff interviews: Nabokov insisted on being given time to prep and write his answers, even in television interviews, where he’d read dense, careful replies from notecards. For chefs, even eloquent conversation-alists like Cheetie Kumar, their story may be most reliably told on plates. This is perhaps particularly true for chefs of color, who are so often written about in terms that have more to do with types than specifics.

If Garland combines with Cheetie Kumar’s name to put you in mind of a floral wreath being placed over a gently inclined brown neck, you have brought the wrong expectations to dinner.

Much of Kumar’s food is Indian, sure—but the category of “Indian food” is already so vast it can only suggest the hundreds of regional cuisines of that country. And when she’s building one of

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Chef Cheetie Kumar at Garland, her restaurant in Raleigh, NC

her complex dishes, she's also borrowing French techniques and considering whether Szechuan peppercorns have a place in a largely North Indian array of spices. The answer to the latter question is "of course"—Garland's riffs on Sino-Indian cuisine and selective pan-Asian reach manifest in a tofu bowl adorned with rice-tapioca cracklin-peanut crunch, and those peppercorns exude their numbing glow in a dish of marinated local turnips. The menu's regionality is impossible to pinpoint, and speaking to Kumar, it's clear that the individualism of her recipes owes as much to research, tasting, and experimentation as it does to the food she grew up eating, and what she wants to eat right now. Garland's carrots tell part of that story.

"We cook the carrots until they're just tender, and then reduce the liquid down to a glaze. And then, to order, we do a little aromatic base of a lot of ginger, a shit-ton of ground coriander, and chilies. Bloom that, and then cook the carrots with the reduced glaze, a quick sauté. Then you can go anywhere with it."

We move on to talking about mustard, and Kumar mentions a technique she first gleaned from a Michael Ruhlman cookbook moments before telling me that the pickle I ate the night before was her mother's recipe—and we joke about how people are much more interested in a brown chef's familial legacy than any of the rest of her story.

The culture and cuisine of Garland are as Southern as they are subcontinental. Kumar works with the ingredients that are most closely accessible, in this city she's called home since college. And while Garland's name does have something to do with India and Kumar's past, it's an architectural echo: The circa-1960 Garland Jones office building was catty-corner to the site of Kumar's restaurant before it was razed in 2009, and it reminded

her of the city where she spent her childhood. "It was very Chandigarh. All multi-colour panels, very modernist," she says. "After independence, Nehru wanted to build the 'City Modern.'" This was Chandigarh: Le Corbusier ultimately won the contract, and Kumar would be reminded of the architecture of her childhood city when she ended up in Raleigh.

When I first visited the restaurant on February 15, Garland didn't have that depleted, trembling atmosphere that often characterizes the aftermath of a Valentine's Day service. This place is used to being full, and it was when I walked in. It's a big space, one that Kumar struggled to fill in the early days. When the restaurant opened in 2013, many customers came in search of an Indian buffet, not a chef-driven menu of shareable small plates. Some took to Yelp to lament the lack of butter chicken. Influential local critic Greg Cox gave the restaurant an early boost with a four-star review in the *Raleigh News & Observer*, while influential local restaurateurs Matt Kelly and Ashley Christensen got it immediately, turning their own staff and regulars on to Kumar's food. The undeniable qualities of Kumar's cooking began to fill seats within a few months. The restaurant spans 3,000 square feet, one wall dominated by a monochrome tree silhouette while the back flowers with colorful, subcontinent-influenced pop art paintings by Scott Nurkin. A great central slab of table unsubtly suggests the community dining that Kumar favors.

Paul Siler, Kumar's husband and co-owner, was walking the floor, checking in with tables, then shaking my hand when he spotted me. We'd met a few months before, at that foodways event in Tennessee where I'd first eaten Chee-chie's food. Siler, who looks like a handsome Lou Reed with better hair and a frustrating slenderness for such a champion

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Braised lamb shank at Garland





Garland mural by Scott Nurkin, a North Carolina-based artist and Kumar's bandmate in Birds of Avalon

eater and drinker, is a gifted host. But it's not just a gift. As Kumar and I moved between discussing her career to talking over the often-hacky, stereotype-rich method of telling the stories of South Asian chefs in the West, we admitted that the one about an inability to dissociate hard work from a sense of self-worth may be true. But Kumar was quick to draw Goldsboro, North Carolina, native Siler in: "His work ethic is just insane. He doesn't even see it as work."

Siler walked Kumar and me to a booth, where the customers seated around us noticed her rare appearance as a diner. Garland regulars are unabashed Kumar fans, and spoke up to let her know, especially when we surrendered our booth to a larger party and took places at the central table.

I ceded ordering to Kumar. The menu features some familiar touchstones—Siler and the front of house are always quick to point the skeptical parents of adventurous young diners toward the tandoori chicken. But dishes like a crispy halloumi with dinosaur kale, or the corn cake with greens that comes with a tandoor onion and fennel compote and yogurt paneer, telegraph that Kumar's domain is not a U.K.-style curryhouse, or a purveyor of regionally dedicated Indian cuisine.

Kumar's particularity gave early diners at Garland pause, and not just white Americans. "I don't think the average American guest finds too much to complain about except when they consider themselves really well travelled and experts on authenticity. But a lot of Indian people think of themselves as discerning experts on authenticity." There are as many different ideas of what "real" Indian food is as there are actually distinct varieties of regional Indian cuisine—and Garland's tables are best approached without preconceptions.

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Kumar and I agree that when it comes to South Asian chefs and writers in the West, a discussion of origins and heritage takes precedence over an individual, personal story. It's what we talked about when we met in Tennessee, and I delivered a talk on the subject—while I mainly stayed in my lane of discussing what was lost when diasporic writers are perceptually trapped in a nostalgia narrative cluttered with stereotypes about the homeland, mothers, and authenticity, it had become clear to me that diasporic chefs had to combat many levels of origin-obsessed gentle prejudice before their food could be tasted as their own.

When the waiter, a fresh hire, made an error (telling us there's dill in a dish that actually features fennel fronds), Kumar was kind but quick (but *quick*) to point it out. Plates started to arrive, the Chicken 65 an early star. A boneless thigh dish with curry leaves, 65 originated in Chennai, about as far south in India as

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Kumar's Chandigarh roots are north. Its presence on the menu—and her pickled-chilies and turmeric yogurt sauce twist—indicate Kumar's approach to cooking: While paying respect to the origins of any dish, she aligns its flavors with the rest of her offerings. On a constantly shifting menu, Chicken 65 has had a place since Garland's initial incarnation as a walk-up window, during the five months while Kumar worked to remodel the interior of the restaurant.

“We opened the restaurant for—I mean, it’s a lot of money, but \$120,000. That’s like 10 percent of what normal people open a restaurant for. Because it took us so long and we used materials that were already in the building.”

I asked Kumar how she wants people to eat her food, if there’s a correct way to go about Garland’s menu.

“I want them to share. I really want to change the menu—I hate entrées, because people will say, ‘I’ll get this for an appetizer and I’ll get this for an entree.’ And that’s just no fun. Putting Indian food in that sort of structure—really any food that’s not French is not suitable for courses. Same with Southern food. Southern people don’t have courses, traditionally, they have meat-and-three. They have a thali, really. It’s the same thing. So how do you elevate that experience? We like to have a fuck-ton of food on the table, and we want to pick at a whole lot of things that sometimes elevate each other. I want that experience to be a part of the menu.”

Raleigh, in the late 1990s and now, is a place where it felt like you could invent something.

Kumar’s food speaks to a personal authenticity, shaped by experience, historical and cultural connections and research, by Raleigh’s produce, by her book-learned techniques, and her own inventiveness. It’s an approach that’s becoming increasingly prevalent in the immigrant-rich South, as chef-driven restaurants from multiple diasporas trade nostalgia for personal stylistic innovation, without jettisoning a deep

regard for the cultural history of food.

Much of what Kumar and I discussed when we met in Tennessee was how to defeat the typical diversity-culture-origin-story foisted on South Asian chefs, artists, and writers in the West—a story of nostalgia, of parents who don’t understand, of looking back to the homeland. And the most difficult bit: what to do when some of those elements of the clichéd story were true. The architectural parallels between Raleigh and Chandigarh are the classic stuff of a South Asian truth-in-roots nostalgia narrative: Cheetie found a new home in this Southern city that reminds her of her Indian city. But it’s also the stuff of unique coincidence, a story that, like these dishes, only belongs to Cheetie Kumar.

A COUPLE OF DAYS after our meal at Garland, Kumar picked me up and we tried to beat the clock for the 4 P.M. closure of a chaat-focused restaurant she’d been meaning to try. On the ride, we talked about identity: not hers, but that of her businesses. Garland was the last of the three-businesses-in-one-building that Siler and Kumar opened: It’s the meat of the sandwich (or the potato patty in the phav bhaji, as I would put it if I were writing the kind of profile Kumar and I bond over reviling). Neptunes and Kings are the other two components of the compact enterprise, the bar below and music venue above the restaurant, both of which opened in the same location in 2010. Kings had previously existed in another location that was demolished, which was part of the drive for Siler and Kumar to set up their new businesses.

Kumar’s childhood in Chandigarh was bookended by her birth in Pittsburgh and the family’s move to the Bronx when she was eight, where her parents worked as

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biochemists. She went to college in Boston, and as a committed music fan who wanted to be in a scene but didn't want to move to LA, she dreaded the move back to New York. "I felt very hopeless in New York, thinking "How do you do this?" How do you live in America? It's very draining."

Raleigh, in the late 1990s and now, is a place where Kumar says it "felt like you could invent something." She fell in love with the city on a spring break trip from Boston, to this region that gave birth to the post-R.E.M. Southern music she loved, bands like The Connells and Flat Duo Jets. The brutal winter she faced during her senior year back at UMass and the prospect of low rent in Raleigh sealed it. At twenty-one, she moved south and stayed.

"There's something about the community here that really was palpable—I felt like Raleigh had a convergence of things. It was a capital, it had a college, it was small but had a little bit of a sprawl, it

had these Asian communities and markets. The farmer's market was a big thing. The modernist architectural landscape that was like Chandigarh. And it was really affordable—I could take a breath and figure out what the fuck I was going to do with my life. I had never really done that in America—and Raleigh afforded me the time to realize I was never going to figure it out." This sense of acting on well-considered instinct, of thinking out the next steps in a place where it feels right, would carry Kumar through to the establishment of her businesses and into her role as a head chef.

We got to the Bombay Chat House just after 3:30. It's in Cary, a heavily South Asian suburb of Raleigh, the brown population growing alongside the tech sector. Cary developed as a bedroom community for the Research Triangle Park about ten miles northwest, and the growing East Asian and South Asian professional population in the 1990s led to a parallel development of immigrant-owned

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international markets and strip-mall restaurants.

Two kids, family of the owners or someone who works there, played in the booths next to ours as we sat down to golgappas, samosa chole chaat, and chai.

"The availability of food and ingredients is really helpful. Well, it's kind of crucial," Kumar told me. Garland doesn't have suppliers in the traditional sense—there are no trucks of produce and fish turning up on West Martin, parking in front of the tour vans for the bands who are hauling amps upstairs to Kings. Kumar and her kitchen staff make trips to individual purveyors like Patel Brothers and butchers who work directly with farms—there's no commodity meat, no fish from Hawaii or Japan, not even salmon at Garland.

Kumar met Siler soon after she arrived in Raleigh, and their relationship became part of why she stayed. But music was the core. "I was working for this management company, then realized I hated my boss, and I had enough friends in good bands. I started my own company, got these bands major label deals." Kumar was managing during a fertile time in the early 2000s music scene, working long hours to secure showcases that launched a couple of her acts. "Then I realized I didn't really want to be a manager. I'm not that personality, not a shy-ster-schmooser-shaker kinda person."

There is one unique point of origin that plenty of writers seize on about Kumar. She's frequently referred to as a "rock star chef" due to what she did after ditching management: She became a lead guitarist in touring bands, a couple of which—The Cherry Valence and the still-going Birds of Avalon—used to spend upwards of six months a year on the road. Avalon's drummer, Scott Nurkin, painted that Bollywood pop art on Garland's back wall. But this piece of information is

more often treated as a quirky byroad than as an essential piece of what makes Garland work.

"That whole career thing fell apart—the bands didn't want to tour as much as the label wanted them to tour, they got dropped, their million dollar deals just went poof. When I met Paul, we started playing music, and that was it. I bought a van and (we) went on tour. So that was the next twelve years."

You don't learn to be a rock star when you're touring in a van, sleeping on floors, and thriving on the music and shows alone. You learn endurance, commitment, and how to manage your drinking so your career doesn't derail, all skills that are essential in running a kitchen and a business. And in Kumar's case, she also learned how to make dinner with a hot plate, a Subway salad, the traveling spice

No cooking school, no apprenticeship, no chef mentor shaped Kumar's menu. She did it herself.

rack that was in the back with the instruments, and a can of lentils or chickpeas.

While back in Raleigh, Kumar cleared road debt by bartending and making occasional specials at Rockford, a sandwich-and-booze bar. After 2010, realizing that succeeding in the music landscape had more to do with *Pitchfork* reviews and online career management than paying road dues, Kumar and Siler got serious about opening their businesses together.

In the early days of Neptunes and Kings in its new location, the work ethic that Kumar and Siler brought from the road was essential. "I was managing both those places on the bar side, hiring and

training and developing all of the menus. We were hyper-seasonal at Neptunes—we would do like six cocktail menus a year. I was getting my bearings there, running a business. I was there full time. The other three guys, including Paul, had other jobs.”

Kumar is a chef who created herself. Her inventiveness, her sophisticated experiments in integrating techniques learned from books with ingredients from regional North Indian cuisines—is the self-taught brilliance of a home cook whose first real kitchen was the one that she ran.

I looked for a tactful way of asking how on Earth she thought she would be able to make the next step from managing a bar and music venue toward her ultimate goal—running the kitchen in a fine dining restaurant. Her own restaurant.

“I didn’t really think that I had a choice. I decided that I would out-work everybody. I would just be there, and I would show them that I’m not asking them to do something that I’m not willing to do. And that they can’t tell me that it’s too hard, that I’m being unrealistic.”

“It probably didn’t help our case that we were a walk-up window. Me, two cooks and a dishwasher. To go from that to fine dining was...stupid.” It may have been an improbable move, but the point, for her, was always the restaurant. So it had to be done. The food window that was Garland’s first incarnation served her Chicken 65 along with a “pork rice bowl, couple of chaat things, pakora. The pakora was initially more like a bonda, a ground thing, and we were doing ‘frankies’—little roti rolls.”

“It’s still an issue—*what’s the voice?* What kind of restaurant is it going to be? What’s going to work? I don’t know how to plate. I’m not sure if I know how to break down fish. The worries were tiny and huge, but all-encompassing.”

Kumar and Siler also faced resistance from their original two partners, who made it clear that they had limited confidence in her ability to launch and run the food concept, and were leaning toward leasing out the restaurant space between Kings and Neptunes Parlour. Kumar shared some of their doubts.

“I really didn’t think I knew how to do it, which is why we started out as just a window. I figured I could cook, and I knew I could work. But I didn’t know how to manage front-of-house. Or thinking about wine lists, all of that. I was trying to buy some time.”

Beyond the reliable support of Paul Siler as a partner in all senses, community became a defining force for Garland, and for Kumar. “I didn’t really know what kind of place we were. I didn’t know where we belonged, I didn’t know who my peers were. I didn’t know what support system I had, I didn’t know if I was going to be able to do this without wearing a chef’s coat.”

Her peers found her: namely, Ashley Christensen, owner of Poole’s Diner and a small empire of restaurants across Raleigh; and Durham chef Matt Kelly. “Great businessman, awesome chef, very intimidating,” is how Kumar describes Kelly, “But also, just a very sweet bro. And he had their [staff] Christmas party at Garland in February 2014. We had opened in December. Lot of pressure, but man, what a sweet thing to do. A really big chance for us.”

Ashley Christensen’s presence was even more significant. “I needed a friend who was wise and knew the business,” Kumar says. “And Ashley would stop by and, you know, I would cry until two in the morning. Drinking rye whiskey with her, saying, ‘How do I do this?’”

“It was difficult for Raleigh to catch on, and I had so much of a crisis about how to present it, and what to call it,



having the confidence to just say, ‘this is what I do.’ The people who got it were the ones who cooked for a living or ate out a lot.”

Building these businesses and the ever-evolving menu are the work that makes sense of Kumar’s place in life. Finding the identity of Garland had less to do with reaching into her culinary and family past than it did with becoming a person who could do what she wanted to, in a place that she had built, in the city she loved. And identity—personal identity, a restaurant’s identity—doesn’t have a finishing point: It is a process, much like Cheetie Kumar’s cooking.

As we start talking food specifics again, Kumar points out something I hadn’t quite noticed—the carrot dish she cooked for the dinner in Tennessee was different from the one I ate in Garland.

“Now, we’re doing pistachios and

toasted coconut and poha and this buttermilk that’s local. I just love it, and it somehow works really well with coconut milk. It’s funky enough to hang on. It’s a simple broth. I’m in love with poha right now. Flattened rice. That nutty texture. Sometimes we’ll put toasted coconut with poha and julienned curry leaves, and it’s a great crunchy textural flavourful topping. Carrots are in season twice a year, so we’re always doing something with that basic recipe.”

I return to Garland the day after our meal in the suburbs. Kumar’s in the kitchen, and too busy to say much more than a quick hello. When the server comes, I panic and order as I have for years: small plate, then entrée. Those carrots, and the tandoori. A moment later, I feel as though I’ve slightly let Kumar—and Garland—down, but I know the food won’t let me down. 🍷

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