



A
COMET
CALLED
RAJJI

**Today's South Asian Southern
chefs stand on the shoulders
of the late Raji Jallepalli**

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ONE DAY NEAR THE END OF 2001, the chef and cookbook author Raji Jallepalli emailed her literary agent, Janis Donnaud, to say goodbye. Raji was dying.

She learned she had late-stage gastric cancer that November. In the preamble to her death, Raji prepared herself for the inevitable: At the end of December, she closed down Restaurant Raji, the daring Franco-Indian Memphis restaurant that had earned her two James Beard Award nominations in the previous decade. She shuttered a bed-and-breakfast, Maison Raji, which had just opened a few doors down from the restaurant. She wound down her consulting work at New York City's Tamarind, where she was executive chef.

Donnaud was alarmed by how casually Raji disclosed the news. "I called her—I was like, *are you kidding?*" Donnaud remembers.

But the blasé manner with which Raji accepted her fate, and bluntly shared it

with those closest to her, was in character. She was a renegade. Raji's nonconformity began with her choice to devote her professional life to food, a sharp pivot from the days when she incubated tissue in a microbiology laboratory. Her puritanical Hindu Brahmin family in the Indian city of Hyderabad had pushed higher education; they believed cooking to be beneath her birthright.

She resisted food's pull even as she moved to the United States as a bride in 1969, but she heeded the call two decades later when she opened a thirty-seat, reservation-only Memphis restaurant meant to be her husband Panduranga Jallepalli's tax shelter. Her decision to begin a restaurant constituted a risk. Raji was an outsider in every sense of the word, an immigrant Indian woman with no culinary

schooling, parked in the American South.

Raji's food was as unorthodox as she was. She freed Indian cuisine of the stereotypes that bound it and put it on equal footing with French gastronomy. She rotated the prix fixe menu nightly: a tandoori quail one night; potato gratin animated with onions, garlic, and saffron on another.

French and Indian cuisines may have seemed like unlikely bedfellows to diners primed to think of foie gras and curry as discordant. But not to Raji, whose view of the world was giving and open enough to tease out the complementary traits between the two cuisines. She served tamarind consommé. Corn compote in bowls made from papadums. Pan-seared scallops on zucchini perfumed with garlic and ajwain, smoothed to a paste as green as wasabi.

Putting French and Indian cuisines in conversation with one another, she leveled the imbalances in an unspoken hierarchy that placed French cooking above Indian. "Fusion" had already become a dirty word by the time she made a name for herself. It connoted confused attempts to patch together different cooking languages under the patina of multiculturalism, as if two worlds jostled for dominance on a plate. Raji disentangled fusion from the gracelessness that the label implied.

Her blazing ingenuity tempted food writer Kerri Conan to compare her to a "comet ... generating a culinary lightshow." The comparison feels inescapable when you consider the trajectory of her career and its tragic coda, the force with which she arrived and the speed with which she vanished. Cancer claimed her near the end of January 2002, nine weeks after her diagnosis. She was fifty-two.

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Comets have tails, too, and Raji left a particularly long one. Maybe we're ready to see it now.

WE'RE IN THE midst of a welcome movement in Southern food. A class of chefs born on the Indian subcontinent, now based in the American South, is widening Southern food's contours. These chefs—among them Asha Gomez of Atlanta, Meherwan Irani of Asheville, Cheetie Kumar of Raleigh, Maneet Chauhan of Nashville, and Vishwesh Bhatt of Oxford—have, since 2018, gathered around the region to stage a supper series, *Brown in the South*. The existence intimated in the title finds expression through Irani's kale pakoras, through Chauhan's "meat-and-three" thali. These dishes take cues from ancestral and adopted homes, planting roots in Southern soil without squandering a sense of the immigrant soul.

If this cohort feels like a family, Raji may be their foremother. "She's such a legend," says Chauhan. "Somebody that all of us are so inspired by."

Two decades ago, the notion of interlaced cuisines like Raji's may have provoked skepticism. The American South now seems more open to blended cuisines. Think of Edward Lee, with his union of Korean and Southern cooking, or of Andrea Reusing, who grabs influences

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from the whole continent of Asia and interweaves them with North Carolina ingredients. In Memphis, the building that formerly housed Restaurant Raji is now Andrew Michael Italian Kitchen, where the menu knits together Italian and Southern ingredients.

Raji dealt with a far more inhospitable climate than these chefs do today. One to two generations younger than Raji, the current faction of Indian-born chefs in the South still deals with diners who expect buffets with butter chicken. But unlike the chefs of Brown in the South, who blend elements from Indian and Southern cuisines, Raji’s food was resolutely Franco-Indian. She occasionally borrowed from her Southern surroundings, spicing grits with mustard seeds and ghee or using collards in lieu of banana or lotus leaves to hug veal medallions. But her primary objective, as she wrote in her cookbook, *Raji Cuisine*, was to “retain the basic principles and balance of French cuisine while introducing the profound bouquets of Indian cooking.”

This key nuance separates Raji’s work from those of her spiritual successors like Chauhan and Irani. Still, Raji recognized a shape-shifting possibility in Indian cuisine that would enable it to appeal to American Southerners.

RAJESWARI RAMPALLI, as she was born in Hyderabad in May 1949, wobbled her way into the world of food. Her father was a high-ranking government official in the Indian state of Andhra Pradesh. Because of the diplomatic nature of his role, the family traveled to Europe often. Young Raji was especially drawn to France.

As a child, Raji spent much time in places where her family told her she didn’t belong, like the kitchen and the garden. She couldn’t help it. The art and alchemy of cooking beckoned her to the kitchen, a cavern of coconut milk, lemongrass, and ginger in the hands of Mrs. Ayyer, the family cook whose side she refused to leave. Some afternoons, she wandered through the garden, with its amaranth leaves and ripening fruit. Her grandmother would snatch the young girl back inside, fearing the sun would make her too dark for a man to marry her.

Raji did get married, though. She moved to the United States at age twenty with her husband and transitioned into work as a medical technologist. Over the next three years, she gave birth to her sons, Prasad and Satish. After living in New York and New Jersey, the family moved to Memphis so Panduranga could complete his clinical fellowship in endocrinology.

There wasn’t a sizable Indian community in Memphis in the early 1970s. Shopping for Indian spices was a “serious journey,” Prasad says. In those early years, Raji committed herself to the role of a stay-at-home mother, occasionally doing lab or managerial work at her husband’s practice. Free from the gaze of her parents, Raji’s attraction toward food intensified. Near the beginning of that decade, she began writing a vegetarian Indian cookbook that she never completed.

Back in those early days, she wore saris, but as she spent more time in Memphis,

Raji underwent what Prasad calls an “amazing metamorphosis.” She gradually began slipping into shirts and pants, a cosmetic shift that mirrored her embrace of her adopted Southern home.

“MEMPHIS WAS DEFINITELY not at the front end of the food curve in terms of bringing things in from the outside,” Prasad says. This was the partial impetus for his mother starting a restaurant: “Simply the realization that, gee, there isn’t really any Indian food.”

Raji opened the East India Company on Valentine’s Day in 1989. She fashioned the original east Memphis restaurant in the likeness of a curry house. The initial menu included aloo samosas and chicken vindaloo one could’ve found at a restaurant dotting Manhattan’s Curry Row or Atlanta’s Lawrenceville Highway.

Those choices weren’t quite working for her clientele. So, facing failure, she took a greater gamble. Raji gave her menu a French facelift, motivated by a sudden desire, Prasad says, to mount a fusion project. By 1992, she rechristened the place Restaurant Raji.

Raji made friends with the Memphis food community. A lover of French wine, she turned to Shields Hood, a wine distributor in the city. He warned her about the challenge of her undertaking.

“I kept saying, ‘Look, you’re in one of the worst markets in the country to do an Indian restaurant,’” Hood remembers. “She said she liked my outspokenness.” There were virtually no Indian restaurants in that part of the South at the time, Hood says, especially ones that were white tablecloth, special-occasion restaurants like hers.

Raji wasn’t deterred. Her strategy for success, according to Hood, was to befriend some of the country’s most lauded chefs, including Charlie Trotter and

Jean-Louis Palladin. Leveraging these relationships, according to Hood, helped Raji draw an audience to her restaurant. She cooked with Palladin at his Washington, DC, restaurant, Jean-Louis at the Watergate Hotel, and with Charlie Trotter in his eponymous Chicago restaurant. Her connections to these chefs helped Restaurant Raji attract patrons from outside the city.

“There was a lot of orthodoxy in the French culinary world,” Prasad says. She was willing to disrupt that dogma. Trotter wrote the foreword to Raji’s cookbook, christening her a “Spice Poet”



whose culinary creations were characterized with “a lyricism, even a femininity, not with rugged, bold strokes.”

Raji’s plates, marked by what Trotter labeled a “minimalist approach, maximalist result,” were quiet but vivid in flavor. Take her seared, semi-boneless tandoori quail, which she prepared on a segment of *Great Chefs, Great Cities*, a program broadcast on the Discovery Channel in the 1990s. She rubbed the quail with tandoori masala and pan-sautéed it for three minutes, its skin turning wildfire red. She rested the bird on a bed of corn and cilantro compote that she’d sautéed in butter and seasoned with cumin and turmeric, painting the plate with a sesame-sage vinaigrette.

Though Prasad insists that the family greeted his mother’s decision to open a restaurant with support, Raji claimed in

an interview with the *Boston Globe* that her husband became frustrated with her new career, and the marriage faltered as her profile rose. Panduranga, who died in 2018, couldn't understand his wife's romance with cooking. He asked if she was having an affair. She responded in the affirmative.

"I am having an affair," she reportedly shot back. "But it's with the restaurant."

RAJI WORKED WITH a sole assistant out of a small kitchen that resembled that of a home cook, not a chef de cuisine. In the event that she was out of town, a message on her answering machine would instruct hopeful patrons to "order pizza tonight, guys. See you next week."

She let impulse and spontaneity steer her in the kitchen, where chefs with more formal training might have relied on canon. In her cookbook, she explained that when devising a menu, she began picturing a dish while shopping for fresh ingredients. Afterwards, she began thinking of the sensory elements— "texture, color, flavor, and lightness."

She drew on her memory of Hyderabad flavors. A velouté of curried butternut squash soup recalled the abundance of squash during monsoon season. Cornish

game hens in a lentil ragout reminded her of a soup that she once saw her father's workers make. Her cooking applied French precision to the intense tastes that had never left her tongue. She encouraged others to share her curiosity, to see recipes not as mandates but as ideas with fuzzy edges, "rough sketches for your own culinary adventure."

At the same time, Raji analogized cooking to science, says Prasad. The two practices were bound by a need to ground your whimsy in technique, to have a tight grasp on what variables you could play with and which ones were inflexible. She coupled her patience for the rigors of trial-and-error with her surplus of ideas.

Her process resulted in dishes like sautéed scallops piled high with matchsticks of fried leek and planted in a puddle of zucchini coulis. She seared the scallops in a shallow pool of brandy and oil until they turned amber.

"You never knew what was going to come up, because she cooked every day for that night," Fredric Koepfel, former restaurant critic for the *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, remembers. Koepfel was a fan of Raji—the woman and the restaurant. He confesses that the food could be erratic because of the shape-shifting nature of the menu.

"You didn't always get a really polished restaurant experience, but what you got was something, to my mind, even more important than that," Koepfel says. "That was an experience of great authenticity and great character." Above all, he says, Raji "gave worth to the notion of French-Indian cuisine."

John Kessler experienced this unsteadiness firsthand. A longtime dining critic at the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, Kessler traveled to Memphis in 1998 on assignment. While there, he stopped by Raji in the hopes of writing about it. He found Raji herself magnetic.

Raji had no interest in conforming to American imaginings of India and, in particular, of Indian women

"She had really long hair—I don't know why, but it was just something that was such a part of how she moved through the world," he says. "She definitely had kind of a star presence."

But Kessler found his meal there unsatisfying, and he didn't hold back in his review. "I've eaten at Raji only once, but I was frankly disappointed by the menu I sampled," he wrote. The review wasn't an outright pan. He noted that Raji's gregarious personality enlivened the dining room, and that he'd heard from reliable sources that she could be brilliant. He just didn't see that brilliance in cucumber soup with yogurt and poached shrimp that was "pretty but kind of flavorless," he remembers, a good idea that faltered when it came to technical execution. To him, these dishes were hypothetically great but lacked cooking finesse.

Writing the review was a point of stress for Kessler, who liked Raji and wanted a reason to like the restaurant. He wondered if his own predisposition toward fiery Indian food had set him up for disappointment.

In his recollection, Raji called him after the piece's publication and somewhat tearfully explained that she had been

exhausted from a recent trip. The food she cooked on the night Kessler visited had fallen short of her standards. Following the call, Kessler understood her as someone who cared deeply about her craft. He regards Raji as a "pioneer" today.

Raji was pushing Americans to think of Indian food beyond the expectations they'd set for it. "In the US, we did tend to be stereotyped in all kinds of boxes that are convenient for people to put us into," remembers Indian-born chef Suvir Saran, a friend of Raji. "Raji broke out of them and was happy to be out of them and shocked people in not fitting into their version of what they thought Raji should be."

Raji had no interest in conforming to American imaginings of India and, in particular, of Indian women, says Saran. "You could call her a sassy, brassy broad and she would agree with it. She wasn't a shrinking violet." He was struck, for example, by Raji's unflinching love of cigars, which rivaled her love of French wine.

Raji earned national recognition in the 1990s. She cooked at the James Beard House six times between 1992 and 1998. She earned Beard Award nominations for Best Chef: Southeast in 1996 and 1997. She became a consulting chef at Surya, which opened in Manhattan's Greenwich Village in 1998. Raji's 2000 cookbook, published by HarperCollins, crystallized her Franco-Indian culinary philosophy for home cooks. It was a rejoinder to the dominant Indian cookbooks of the time. Even the book's title, *Raji Cuisine: Indian Flavors, French Passion*, reads like a branding statement: Raji's style of cooking was hers and hers alone.

"She came along at a time when her kind of cooking, the flavors, the spices—they were around, certainly," says Raji's coauthor, Judith Choate. "Madhur Jaffrey was already around. But she faced it in a very different way."



THE MOST PROMISING sign that Raji was on the cusp of stardom came in 2000 when restaurateur Avtar Walia tapped her to be the executive chef of Tamarind, a fine dining restaurant in the Manhattan neighborhood of Tribeca. Walia gave her *carte blanche* to design the menu. After Tamarind opened in January 2001, Raji occasionally traveled to New York, though she spent most of her time in Memphis.

It was a time, Saran remembers, when Indian food was still struggling to gain wider appreciation in the United States. “We’re always the next best cuisine,” he says, speaking of Indian cuisine in the context of fine dining today. “When she started Tamarind, it wasn’t even close to the next best thing.”

Raji’s cooking at Tamarind was a showcase for her culinary guile. She served she-crab soup jolted with ginger juice and dusted with saffron and chives; she cooked a *nargisi kofta*, an ancestor of the Scotch egg, with chopped lotus root and cheese in place of meat. Though the restaurant still stands today, only a handful of Raji’s original dishes live on.

In a 2001 *New York Times* review, restaurant critic William Grimes wrote that Tamarind “treats Indian cuisine as a genuine culinary language, like French, able to assimilate nontraditional ingredients and techniques.” His two-star review read like a three.

Current *New York Times* restaurant critic Pete Wells ate at Tamarind shortly after it opened, when he was the restaurant editor at *Food & Wine*.

“It’s not like she became a fixture on the New York food scene, but on the other hand, she did it right in the sense that people accepted that restaurant immediately,” Wells says. “A lot of out-of-town chefs have a hard time with that.”

Raji died less than a year after Wells’ visit to Tamarind. Her flight path suggested

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aborted promise. “Everyone thought it was a shame because she was so young,” Wells says. “She had just opened this place that seemed to have so much to say that no one was saying.”

If the wider nation dealt with the tremors of her loss, Memphis felt her death more acutely. The city knew it lost more than a restaurant when she died.

“It lost her vision of how food could be expanded and turned into a sort of ideal of world cuisine, rather than just focusing on one country,” Koepfel says. “And it lost a great personality.”

IN THE WEEKS following her cancer diagnosis, Raji faced her imminent death with clear eyes.

“She took it a lot better than her kids did. Probably better than I did,” says her second husband, Louis Reiss, whom Raji married in 1999. “She was all ready for it.”

In Reiss’ recollection, Raji didn’t die with many unfulfilled aspirations. She

had no desire, for example, to be on television like Emeril Lagasse. Her primary goal was to have her restaurant and bed-and-breakfast coexist in Memphis under her control.

Raji’s premature death froze her in time, almost cosmically so. “They have this picture of her in their minds—her at her peak of doing what she did,” Prasad says of his mother’s acolytes. “I’m sure Mom would’ve liked being remembered that way very much.”

Many colleagues say they were blindsided by Raji’s death. Outside of her family, she had told few people of her cancer diagnosis. One admirer, chef Vishwesh Bhatt of Snackbar in Oxford, Mississippi, had no idea she was sick. He says he owes his career to Raji, whom he met a few times throughout visits to the restaurant in the late 1990s.

“I don’t think I would be doing what I’m doing without seeing her do what she was doing,” Bhatt says.

An immigrant from Gujarat in India, Bhatt was pursuing a culinary career in Oxford when he first visited the restaurant. There were unspoken parallels between the two chefs: He grew up in a middle-class family, spending his childhood in the city of Ahmedabad. After a gap year with his family in Strasbourg, France, where his physicist father took a post as a visiting professor, Bhatt eventually attended the University of Kentucky. His own route to food, like Raji’s, was a jagged detour from academia. He found her outlook affirming.

“She was the first one to make this light bulb go off in my head that you can do elevated Indian food and people will come to eat it,” says Bhatt. “She was in this little restaurant in Memphis and had

already started turning heads.”

Through Bhatt, Meherwan Irani of the Chai Pani Restaurant Group recently learned of Raji. He found a copy of her cookbook, which is no longer in print. “There’s a couple of restaurants, I’m not going to name names, with chefs that think they’re groundbreaking with Indian cuisine,” says Irani. “I’m flipping through a book and I’m like, *Dude, this was done twenty years ago by this woman and nobody’s giving her recognition.*”

What struck Irani about Raji’s story was how ahead of her time she seemed. Similar struggles echo in the current generation of chefs to which he belongs. “When I read her story, what jumped out at me was that, that early, she had managed to break through,” he says.

Diners would be mistaken if they believed that chefs like Irani, Bhatt, Chauhan, Gomez, and Kumar were the first to express their respective takes on Indian cuisine in the American South to national acclaim. These chefs stand on Raji’s shoulders. Yet Raji is remembered by few and forgotten by many. This truth may be proof that our food media, predisposed to venerate rising stars, suffers from a distressingly short memory, looking forward without reaching into the past.

The new class of Indian chefs in the South appears to be winning the battle Raji fought over two decades ago, asserting that Indian cuisine that resists convention can thrive in the American South. Bhatt recalls Raji often for this very reason: Her career has become a guiding credo for his own.

“I had somebody that I looked up to,” Bhatt says. “A living example of what was possible.” 🍷

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