

CHOO LA AH

INDIAN FOOD FOR EVERYONE

CHOO LA AH IS A TAKE ON THE HINDI TERM, SANJA CHULA, A COMMUNAL EARTHEN OVEN ONCE COMMON IN VILLAGES OF NORTHERN INDIA, WHERE NEIGHBORS GATHERED TO BAKE FRESH BREAD AND SHARE CONVERSATION.

BIRYANI. PAV BHAJI. TIKKA MASALA. NAAN.

Many — possibly even most — Americans do not know these words or what they mean. Randhir Sethi and Raji Sankar hope to change that with their fast-casual restaurant concept Choolaah Indian BBQ.

Sethi and Sankar are co-CEOs of the multi-concept restaurant company Wholesome International, which operates 18 Five Guys restaurants in Pennsylvania and Ohio. In the last two years, the company has launched four Choolaah restaurants — two in northern Virginia — with visions of many more to come.

BIRTH OF AN IDEA

The Choolaah Indian BBQ concept was born over a decade ago. Sethi and Sankar are both engineers who decided to go into the restaurant business after achieving a good deal of success in the information technology and artificial intelligence industries. The dream was to launch a fast casual Indian restaurant, but back then, says Sankar, “the timing wasn’t right for Indian food. It was too early. We did our research and watched grocery shelves. Whole Foods, Trader Joe’s, really, no mainstream grocery was devoting much space to Indian food.” So Sethi and Sankar turned to the Five Guys franchising concept to learn the restaurant trade.

They also did their homework on the kind of Indian food they wanted to serve. Randhir Sethi and his wife, Simran, moved back to India for two years to test out local and traditional dishes that might work in an international setting. Simran Sethi is the company’s director of culinary R&D and product development, an engineer, a tea sommelier, and a foodie in her own right. While in India, the couple tasted and tested their way throughout the country — and beyond — getting advice from street



Choolaah co-CEOs Raji Sankar (l) and Randhir Sethi (r), with culinary R&D director Simran Sethi (m)

vendors to top chefs, from small dhabas (eateries) to five-star establishments. The goal was to create a balance of flavors for diners completely new to Indian food but, at the same time, a “taste of home” for native Indian palates. The results can be seen on the Choolaah menu.

A SENSORY DELIGHT

Walking into Choolaah is a delight to the senses! First, the smells of spices you can’t quite place. Subtle, yet inviting. Warm, pungent, a bit mysterious. Then there is what you see. Light-filled space with clean lines and vibrant colors, illustrated with a gallery of original art that simply pops off the walls. The Choolaah in Merrifield, Virginia features a huge 3D Ganesha elephant — the Hindu god of success — made by artist Tom Megalis,