

partly from recycled items. In the kitchen, behind a wall of glass, are several squat cylindrical tandoor ovens, where you can watch your bread and meats being cooked. It's a bit of drama as the tandoor cooks slap naan — flatbread dough — onto the interior walls of the ovens right before your eyes! With a further touch of whimsy, each oven bears a name. In Choolaah's Merrifield location, meet Larry, Moe, and Curly. In Sterling, it's Tom, Dick, and Harry. (Okay, these folks have a sense of humor!) In the new King of Prussia, Pa. location (which opened in October), it gets a little more serious with four women's names:

Harriet (Tubman),
Betsy (Ross), Kalpana

(Chawla, U.S. astronaut who perished in the Columbia Space Shuttle disaster), and Grace (Hopper, U.S. Navy Rear Admiral).

Don't know enough about Indian food to know what to order? No problem! Guest ambassadors are ready to help as you approach the register. The idea is to create a feeling of hospitality from the get-go, honoring a Sanskrit saying that translates to "A guest is like God." After you order, you can step up to the "hand jacuzzi" — insert your hands and let the soap and warm water flow, giving your hands a delightful, cleansing bath. As you wait for your food, which takes about three minutes, the chatter of family conversation and upbeat music will fill your ears. And then there is the best part, the tasting.

WHAT'S IT LIKE — THE FOOD?

"It's a modern take on Indian food," says Sankar. "It's lighter, more reflective of Indian home cooking." She continues, "It reminds me of my nani's (grandmother's) cooking. It's Punjabi cuisine from northern India. This could be a place anywhere in Punjab."

At 700 degrees, two of the tandoor ovens sear skewered chicken, salmon, vegetables, and

paneer (Indian cheese), while the two others turn out the bread — naan and wheat naan. Lamb meatballs, with a kick of spice, are oven roasted. Most meals include a meat, a white or brown Basmati rice, a bread, and a masala made of vegetables, chickpeas, or lentils. There are salads, tandoori wraps, and street snacks such as crispy dough samosas filled with potatoes, peas, and spices. In addition, there are vegan, vegetarian, gluten-free, onion- and garlic-free, and egg-free options.

Drinks include lassis — yogurt drinks — that are salted or made with Alphonso mangoes, chai tea, iced teas, and mint-ginger

lemonade. For dessert, there are two flavors of homemade ice cream, or kulfi: mango and cardamom-infused. And though the food is not terribly spicy, "hot" is an option at the sauce bar. If you're game enough, try the Choolaah lava sauce for "heat lovers only." Truly, there is something for just about everyone with prices at about \$11 or \$12 per meal.

FOOD SOURCING AS A DEFINING ELEMENT

"Authenticity is critical," says Sankar. "Choolaah food is not whimpy...it does not set your tongue on fire, but it is flavorful and zesty." The goal is healthy and wholesome with no artificial colors or flavors. "Our sourcing is critical," Sankar adds. "We use Bell & Evans chicken, the same chicken as Whole Foods." The lamb is pasture-raised Halal lamb, the tofu is non-GMO, the salmon is from the North Atlantic's Faroe Islands, and the paneer cheese is sourced directly from an Amish farm. "We were unhappy with the paneer we found in the Midwest during development, so we contracted with Amish farmers to use our family recipe and



Ganesha elephant, original art piece, at Choolaah Merrifield

do the cheese right!" Even the food bowls are sustainable — made of compostable sugar cane.

"We've been in pursuit of excellence from day one, sometimes to an almost obsessive level," Sankar says. Each new recipe and ingredient was tested and retested in tasting sessions with experts and lay people alike. Extensive tandoor studies were done in test kitchens in India and Ohio. Even the company's hiring manual was written from scratch to set the highest HR standards. She adds, "The many steps allowed us to put better plans in place and allowed us to think big."

WHAT'S NEXT?

According to Raji Sankar, "We want to be a global company. We hope to see a Choolaah in every corner of the globe in the next decade!" Big dreams? Maybe. But based on the success of the first four properties, with a fifth opening in Pittsburgh next month, it's a great start. "Every element is designed with love. When you walk into Choolaah, hopefully, what you'll say is that we wowed you on all fronts."

"Every day, there is a new possibility for us," Sankar continues. "To see the concept accepted and embraced by the communities is so satisfying," she said. "That's what drives us — to introduce the food to people who have never had Indian food and to those who have had it — and create delight each time." A noble goal for Choolaah and its founders — to take the mystery out of this 4,000-year-old cuisine and bring it to new diners in the 21st century.

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Photos: Richard Kelly



The fun of watching your own bread — naan — baking in a hot tandoor oven