

Bombay Mahal boasts ties to the African continent

By Stephanie Harp

The journey from Punjab, India, and Mombasa, Kenya, to owning Maine's oldest, continually running Indian restaurant has been a long one. But Raj and Bina Sharma, and their three sons, are happy to be right where they are, at the helm of Bombay Mahal on Maine Street in Brunswick. "I like Maine, especially Portland," Bina said. "People are so nice." In Maine, the Sharmas have run Bombay Mahal in Brunswick, previously owned Taadour in Portland and Taste of India in Bangor, and raised three sons.

"His fourth child is Bombay Mahal," said son Van of his father Raj. Now that Van is more involved with the restaurant himself, he acknowledges that it impacts his social life. "All the time your friends have off, that's your core working hours," he said. "But being at the restaurant doesn't feel like work

because we grew up in the hospitality business and it's a part of our identity."

Growing up in Punjab, Raj learned to cook from his uncle, who had owned a popular eatery in New Delhi. Raj later enrolled in a culinary studies program. Bina was born in Kenya to Indian parents from Tanzania. After marrying in London, spending a decade in Germany before the 1989 collapse of the Berlin Wall, they eventually moved to Portland, where they have lived for more than 30 years.

At first, the Sharmas were one of few Indian families, Van said. "Until my brother came to school, I was always the only Indian kid at Portland High School." He and childhood friends who are Indian recently tried to remember how their parents had met in the 1990s. "I think it's by virtue of just being Indian. You figure it out. Anywhere you go, you'll kind of find your tribe. We knew all of the original Indian families in the greater Portland area growing up. Our families go way back."

From gatherings and parties at different houses, gradually Bina and her friends organized the Indian Association of Maine. "We used to do IAM parties and rent a hall in Falmouth or Portland," she said. A few years ago, the group

converted an old Westbrook church into Maine Hindu Temple, where they have festivals and puja ceremonies, though not recently, due to COVID-19. Members come from Brunswick, Portland, South Portland, Westbrook, Falmouth, Yarmouth, and Scarborough, and include many diverse groups from different parts of India. Some have formed their own subgroups and associations.

"The community here is a lot more robust and larger than it ever has been," Van said. It numbers over 100 families. "That original group has changed quite a bit. Many families with younger children...hang out with other younger families. There's a generation who grew up elsewhere, came here for work, and has been here for a few years. It's definitely a lot more vibrant." Many come for technology jobs, and others are entrepreneurs who own businesses in Portland and elsewhere.

Bombay Mahal, where the Sharmas serve North Indian cuisine, has won numerous popularity awards and been featured in USA Today. In addition to in-house dining, the restaurant hosts and caters events, and serves food at festivals. Access to South Asian ingredients in Maine was difficult in the 1990s, requiring travel to Boston once a week or once a month. "Even Indian beer companies weren't interested in coming because they weren't making money on a run here," Van said. That has changed with the growing appetite for global flavors.

That appetite entices a number of Somali customers who drive to Brunswick from Lewiston-Auburn. The Sharmas credit Bollywood movies, marketed across the Middle East and East Africa as an alternative to Hollywood, with generating an appreciation for Indian culture, clothes, and food. Van said Indian and Somali cultures have similar values that are wholesome and rooted in family.

He recently returned to Maine from eight years in London, where he was born. "Most Indians in London can trace their ancestry to Africa," he explained. "[Former Ugandan president] Idi Amin didn't like that Indian immigrants were successful in Uganda and said, 'All Asians have 90 days to leave this country.' The [United Kingdom] stepped in and granted citizenship to South Asians who were being expelled from East Africa. Many families left and started whole new lives in the U.K." Refugees from neighboring Tanzania and Kenya, like Bina's father, also moved to London to start over. Raj's mother was born in Nairobi, so his side of the family has ties to Africa, too.

The family is proud of their African connections, and Van often discussed it with his grandmother and extended family in London. "It's really cool to be Indian with ties to the African continent, which we love. Africa is a big part of our story - sacrifice, having a business, being a minority. In England...a lot of the South Asians are from East Africa. Because of their connections, they're not working for anyone and are highly entrepreneurial. So that and really goes into the next generation. They are businessmen, or have that success factor in them because they lost a lot when they had to leave the successful businesses that their grandparents created. There's a certain creative spirit that comes with that," he said.

Bina and her brothers traveled to Kenya in 2018, for the first time in 30 years. "We were trying to find out where my dad's shop was. It took us the whole day." What had been his bicycle shop now sold car parts. She said, "The house we lived in is completely different now. It had a big yard in the front and we used to play there, now there's a shop in the yard." Her maternal grandfather had gone to Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, in the 1920s, where her mother was born. After marrying, her mother moved to Mombasa. Bina left Kenya



Sharma family picture

when she was 11 years old. "Indian people are still living in Mombasa. They own hotels and a few shops. There are still temples there."

Because he grew up so far away from his cousins, Van took an interest in learning about where his family was from, a



Picture of area the family grew up in Kenya

frequent topic of conversation during his time in London. "I learned a lot of interesting stories at my grandmother's house about them being in Africa and the family business. Other family friends would always stop by for tea and talk about Kenya and my grandparents there. Obviously, my lived experience was very different," he said.

Maine has been mostly friendly to the Sharmas, and their business has been abundant. "Along the coast, most Mainers...are aware of things happening around the world. The people here get it, and they're very supportive," said Van. The longevity of Bombay Mahal is testament to that support for the Sharmas' three decades of offering their Indian food and culture - served with friendly conversation and a dash of Africa.



Raj & Bina cooking at home



Bombay Mahal, Maine's oldest Indian restaurant celebrating 30+ years