

# Culinary R&D

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Researching and Developing the Latest Culinary Trends

## BHARDWAJ AT A GLANCE

**Title:** vice president, chief operating officer and corporate chef, Café Spice, New York

**BIRTH DATE:** Dec. 24, 1959

**HOMETOWN:** New Delhi, India

**EDUCATION:** bachelor's degree from Institute of Hotel Management, Catering and Nutrition, New Delhi



**Rajesh Bhardwaj**

By Bret Thorn

**C**afé Spice is a chain of four casual-dining bistros and four fast-casual shops serving authentic Indian food. The owner, Sushil

Malhotra, ran a fine-dining Indian restaurant, Dawat, in Manhattan for many years before selling it to focus on bringing Indian food to a wider group of diners.

To do so, he teamed up with Rajesh Bhardwaj, who oversees the culinary aspects of the Café Spice chain, with its units primarily located in New York and one bistro in Philadelphia.

After opening the second Café Spice location, Bhardwaj centralized most of the food preparation, moving it to a Long Island City, N.Y., commissary, which he calls the "Quality Control Center." There, Bhardwaj says about 80 percent of the food preparation is carried out for all eight restaurant locations as well as for on-site customers, who now account for about 35 percent of Café Spice's sales.

**The first Café Spice opened in 1998.**

*Were there dishes that you offered on the menu that the American market didn't like?*

No, but there were certain dishes that were not on our original menu which I had to put on, like channa masala [chick pea dahl] and sag paneer [spinach with Indian cheese]. I didn't have them on the first menu, because I tried to create a menu of authentic dishes that most Americans had not tried.

Then customers started saying, "But you don't have a sag paneer?" So we said, "O.K., let's keep some of our new food, but let's also add some dishes that people want to eat." It's never been that something we introduced was not well received; it was just a matter of the servers selling it to [diners] and getting them to try it.

*Many people in the restaurant industry have been predicting for years that Indian food will be the next big cuisine in the United States, and yet it hasn't really*

*taken off yet. Why do you think Indian food has been so slow to catch on?*

I think Indian food is the next thing, for sure. In England, which colonized India and had people who came home with a taste for the food, Indian is, I think, the No. 1 cuisine in the country. Every gas station carries a chicken tikka masala and rice.

But in the United States, I really feel that Indian food has been very badly represented by a lot of people who think of this country as a place to come and make a lot of money. So a lot of Indians came with no experience and, without even knowing the ABCs of cuisine, opened restaurants here.

But now people are beginning to differentiate between good and bad Indian food. I think it's just a matter of time.

*You're from New Delhi and your family's from Punjab, but Indian food is so diverse. How did you learn about the cuisine of other regions?*

I learned in school and while I was working in India. Also, I have a lot of interest, so I talk to chefs when I travel in India. It's both a science and an art, and you can always learn more.

*Why did you decide to centralize your food preparation?*

Every chef has his own way of cooking. If they read a recipe from the same book, each of them is going to cook the dish a little differently. They decide how much the onion should be sautéed, when the tomatoes are ready, when the different spices should go in. As we opened more restaurants, we moved our main chef to the Quality Control Center so that if we open 10 outlets, 20 outlets, the food will taste the same everywhere. ■



## TRENDS



Café Spice is a chain of four casual-dining bistros and four fast-casual shops serving authentic Indian food.