

DINING
colorful cal-indian

words by JOHANNA HARLOW • photography by PAULETTE PHILIPOT



Srijith “Sri” Gopinathan, the chef behind upscale Cal-Indian restaurant Eylan, didn’t always plan to pursue a career in the food industry. But growing up in his family’s communal home in the southernmost part of India, complete with a farm, rice paddy and coconut orchard, meant every meal was farm-to-table. Young Srijith watched his family make palm sugar by boiling sap from trees, scoop the meat from coconuts

and dry it, and pick peppercorns from the vines winding up their house’s walls. “I grew in the midst of all these things ... This was secretly simmering in my mind without me knowing it,” Srijith observes. Then, committing to the food metaphors, he adds with a grin, “I don’t think I planned to be a chef ... It was definitely not force-fed. It has been a very cage-free, organic life!”

This inadvertent education paid off. Initially planning to pursue engineering, Srijith ended up attending the Culinary Institute of America in New York. “New York City was the center of the universe when it came to food at that point,” he reflects, adding that he blew the little money he had dining at high-end restaurants

like Nobu. “Those days, it was like going to temple,” he reminisces.

After working as a chef at Taj Exotica Resort in the Maldives (and surviving a tsunami), Srijith became the executive chef at San Francisco’s Taj Campton Place Hotel. His trailblazing menu gained the hotel not one but two Michelin stars—the first Indian concept to do so in the U.S. Most recently, he’s opened a string of elevated and artful Cal-Indian restaurants with design-savvy restaurateur Ayesha Thapar. Their most recent, Eylan, serves wood-fired dishes like black cod and lamb kebabs in a room aswirl in bold colors, textures and patterns.

Srijith’s down-to-earth demeanor and gleeful chuckle seem unaltered by success and accolades. And he gives everyone their dues, pointing out that a

{food coloring}



successful restaurant isn't fueled solely by its food. The beverage program, service and design are just as integral. "Restaurants get a personality by all these things being tied together," Srijith emphasizes. "One person cannot take credit for it. It's multiple people's ideas. It's a very collaborative, complex thing."

Take the restaurant's interior, a decadent dream-scape of jewel tones, geometric patterns and funky wallpaper brought to life by Ayesha in partnership with Schoos Design. Embracing a lively bohemian tone, Ayesha included a stunning floor-to-ceiling macramé hanging behind the host stand and tigers on the backs

of the barstools. Vines coiling around columns evoke temple ruins, while ancient-looking artifacts and a village mural enhance an atmosphere of antiquity. Art is everywhere. Lampshades like rumpled baskets elicit a bustling bazaar scene.

"Ayesha and myself, we are artists in our own ways," Srijith says. "Where you eat is as important as what you eat." The two previously joined forces to launch Ettan in Palo Alto (commended by *Architectural Digest* for its design) and Copra in San Francisco (which recently ranked among *San Francisco Chronicle's* top seven restaurants citywide).

"We've taken a very deliberate decision of not repeating

a concept," says Srijith. Copra is named after dried coconut, a popular ingredient in South Indian cuisine. The restaurant highlights the Indian state of Tamil Nadu where Srijith grew up, meaning there's plenty of seafood on the menu as well as ingredients like tamarind, turmeric and rice, which are also common to the region. "Out of all these concepts, that is a little more emotional and personal to me, because it's home food," Srijith says.

Ettan, an homage to the eclectic nature of Indian food, offers bold dishes in a bold space. The decor includes chandeliers, pendant lights and hanging plants, all suspended below a grand glass dome. India doesn't just have one cuisine, Srijith points



out. “We have 28 states, and they have more than 200 different cuisines. It’s so complex.”

And Eylan’s focus? Wood-grilled dishes inspired by the hearth-centered cooking of Srijith’s youth. But that doesn’t mean Srijith’s menu is a traditional one. As a pioneer of Cal-Indian dishes, Srijith shines when he pushes the envelope. Take his twist on butter chicken. This decadently creamy, yet arguably over-ordered curry, is often a go-to for Western diners. But when you order it at Eylan, it arrives at your table in an unexpected shade of green instead of that traditional tomato-tinged orange. That’s thanks to the tomatillos. Srijith says he didn’t have butter chicken in mind when he first started experimenting with the

fruit. After grilling it, he tried to counteract its acidity by adding a little honey. “It was still sour so then I added a little bit of butter.” Then, a spoonful of cream. He kept tweaking it with cardamom and spices and other adjustments over a two-week span. “When I finished it, I felt like, ‘Wow, I’m at butter chicken—but no tomatoes!’”

While delicious, you’d be doing yourself a disservice not to explore the rest of the menu. Try the beautifully butterflied black cod adorned in tamarind, curry leaves and turmeric with coconut rice or the bright citrusy hamachi served alongside battered sesame leaves. Sample the savory, succulent trumpet mushrooms with achaari, mint and yogurt when you’re ready to amp up the heat.

Then indulge in refreshing rose water shaved ice with rose lassi frozen yogurt and a sprinkling of ground pistachio to end the night on a sweet note.

Food, Srijith says, is “India’s soft power,” and “I’m trying to do as much as possible to expose its cuisine to the people in this part of the world!” **P**



spice it up

eylanrestaurant.com