

The Singhs bring aroma of India to downtown Benicia

Local couple found the first Indian food establishment in city's history to the delight of local diners

By GRETA MART *Special to the Herald*

The Subway franchise is a pretty good bet of becoming a money-maker. The Indian restaurant on First Street is a little chancier, but Jeet and Jodi Singh, both 30, are hoping Benicians are ready for some home-cooking, Punjabi style.

With one loan from a bank and another from an uncle, combined with the profits from the sale of their Sacramento restaurant, the Singhs invested all their money and hopes in opening two Benician restaurants almost simultaneously.

"We didn't plan it that way. First we had the Subway, and then we were driving by the place on first Street and saw a "for rent" sign and decided to go for it," said Singh.

Jodi Singh manages the Subway shop in Solano Square while her husband Jeet runs Aroma, the first Indian restaurant in Benicia.

Since opening on April 1, Jeet Singh says that business at Aroma gets better each week as word-of-mouth spreads.

"We feel very welcome. People are liking the food, which I'm happy about, as I am Punjabi and the Punjabi people love to cook, to host and serve," Singh said on Monday while juggling several tasks during the lunchtime rush. "My father was a wise man and taught me that there is never any work that is beneath me, I am not ashamed to wash dishes because each job makes up the big picture."

SMELLS GOOD!



RICHARD PARKS Herald Staff

Jeet and Jodi Singh welcome you to their restaurant, where the Benicia couple serve Punjabi cuisine!

Singh was born and raised in Haryana, a state in northern India, where many settlements date back to the Indus Valley Civilization, one of the oldest in human history. His father, now 72, was a successful farmer, but Singh heard the call of distant lands. At 17, he felt he could grow in the United States and followed his brother here.

The authentic taste of India is turning heads ~ and noses - at Benicia's first Indian restaurant

"In India, there is a lot of classism, parochialism. To me, the U.S. is a country that pays you back if you work hard and live with honesty, and you can achieve your dreams and live in dignity," said Singh.

When asked how he came to Benicia, Singh replied, "You go where your destiny takes you."

He explained how he first lived and worked in Marin County, but his new in-laws bought a house on Columbus Parkway and when Jodi and he accompanied them to sign some papers at North American Title, they said, why not live in Benicia too.

"We really like it here, the community is good and we want to raise our kids here. We plan to have children," said Singh.

At Aroma, diners will find all the classic Indian dishes, many of which originated in the Punjab region, such as Tandoor chicken, Naan, Pakoras and dishes with paneer, a type of cheese.

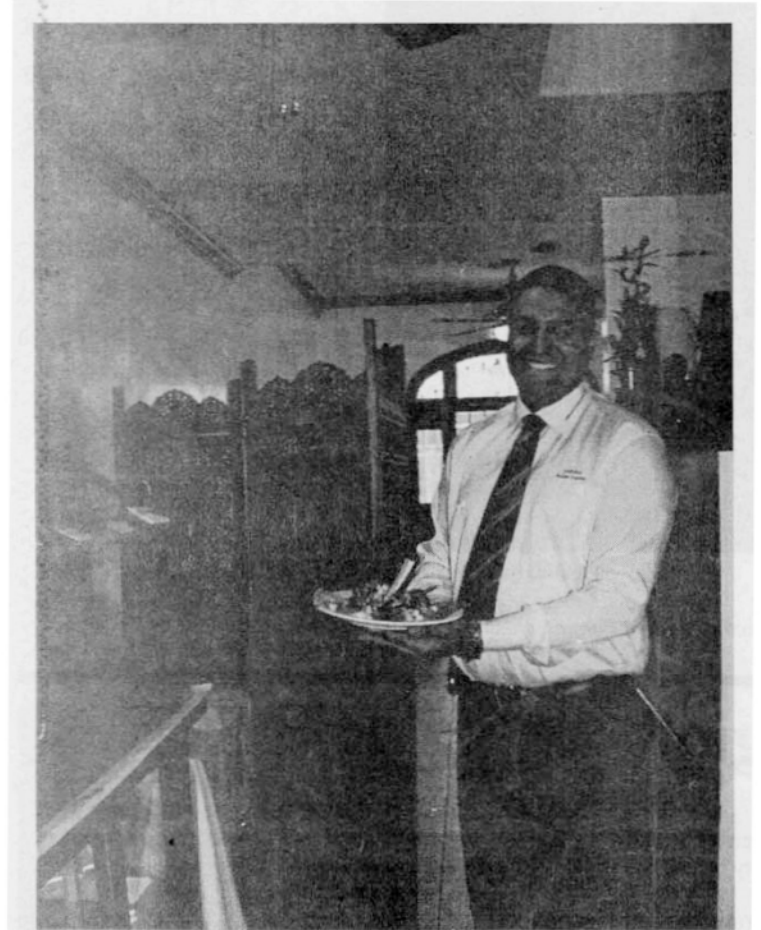
Singh says he puts an emphasis on fresh and high-quality ingredients, as well as accommodating special diets like gluten-free or low salt.

"Right now I'm developing a vegan menu. I love to discover new dishes," enthused Singh.

Singh said both he and his wife are admitted workaholics.

"If we are successful, the credit goes to my wife. She is working so hard." Singh said before sweeping into the dining room to clear dishes.

Aroma is located at 818 First Street and open seven days a week from 11am to 9:30pm. A lunch buffet is served from 11am to 3pm every day. Aroma's phone number is 745-1870.



Jeet Singh in the kitchen of Aroma on First Street. "I am Punjabi and the Punjabi people love to cook, to host and serve," he says. "We feel very welcome."