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A taste of India, in Benicia

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BENICIA - When Jeet Singh dreams, he dreams of cooking. Even after putting in a 14-hour day at his new restaurant, Aroma, he still goes home and contemplates new dishes.

"That's what I think about all the time," he said.

Singh opened the only Indian restaurant in Benicia about a month ago. He said he didn't plan on it, but he drove by and saw a "for rent" sign where Mi Casita Mexican restaurant used to be and decided to give it a shot.

Now instead of tacos, diners can get their fill of curry, chutney and naan.

The First Street restaurant is already doing a brisk trade, for both lunch and dinner, Singh said. Part of that may be people's excitement about a new place to eat. New restaurants on First Street don't crop up too often, and when they do they tend to stay for a long time, city staff said.

The other part may have to do with Singh's passion for cooking.

A native of Punjab who moved here about 11 years ago, Singh said cooking is in his blood.

"Punjabi people are all about eating," they love to cook and feed people, he said.

But he truly learned to appreciate good food from his mother, whom he called "the best cook in the world."

She taught me that there are three ways to eat: with the eyes, the mouth and the stomach, Singh said, and that food must be pleasurable on all three levels. On a recent trip to India, he finally



got to cook for his mother, who paid him the ultimate compliment, telling him his cooking had surpassed her own.

Having lived in Benicia for about two years, Singh said the town is a perfect place for his new venture, with friendly clientele and a small-town feel.

He and his wife also own a Subway franchise on East Second Street. But that doesn't fulfill his passion for culinary artistry, he said.

He wants the personal challenge of creating something and keeping people coming back for more.

"I want to do something good. I want to be satisfied and make people happy," he said.

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• Photo: Jeet Singh's Aroma restaurant has become the only venue serving Indian cuisine on First Street, let alone in the city of Benicia. (Mike Jory/Times-Herald)

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