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How Immigrants are Redefining Hudson Valley Dining

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Dining in the Hudson Valley is Being Redefined by Immigrants

By Kevin Wheeler

Westchester county and the greater Hudson Valley have never been known for their restaurants. While ubiquitous Italian-American red sauce spots and diners serve their purpose, they do not usually demand any detours. Sure, there might be an iconic hot dog stand like Walter's in Mamaroneck, and the preeminent cooking school of the United States is a few miles north of Poughkeepsie. But mostly, these areas are collectively known as the beautiful backyard of New York City, not as a culinary destination.

That notion is slowly changing, however, as the Hudson Valley becomes more diverse, and thereby more exciting, culinarily speaking. One might say that the region is becoming a little more like New York City, in terms of eclectic culinary offerings—the only difference being it's a bit more spread out.

I write that with no facetiousness. Sure, skeptical reader, I concur that you will not find any Tibetan cafes hiding behind any cell phone shops along the Hudson. This isn't Queens, after all. But diners can get pretty close to that experience—if they look for it. For instance, just trade in the cell phone store in Jackson Heights for a strip mall in Yorktown Heights. There one will find Jewel of Himalaya, a reasonably priced, white tablecloth restaurant with a South Asian lunch buffet. Alongside common Indian dishes like tandoori chicken and chana masala, Jewel serves momos, plump and pleated dumplings that are common in Tibetan and Nepalese restaurants, thukpa, a rich beef or chicken soup with handmade noodles, and thalis, South Asian set meals that come with rice, a curry, pickles, and stewed lentils.

Jewel is special not only because its is unique to the area. Instead, it is one of the many representations of a new cuisine, a new restaurant, showing up in this region. All of these establishments have only opened this decade, drastically changing—and improving—the landscape of dining in Westchester and the Hudson Valley.

Through interviews with the cooks and proprietors of a Middle Eastern restaurant in Mohegan Lake, NY, of a Sri Lankan diner in Beacon, NY, and a Mexican restaurant in Poughkeepsie, NY that specializes in Oaxacan dishes, I've found a common thread among the disparate origins of these restaurants: they are all run by immigrants who are eager to share the best of their culture's cuisine with their communities.

A Taste of Kandy in Beacon: The Red Pepper Diner

By Kevin Wheeler

On the fiftieth try, Saman Kumara finally found the right space to open up his own restaurant with. It would be a diner—The Red Pepper Diner, a name that he said hints at his Sri Lankan background. Kumara had been looking all over the tri-state area for the right spot, but he kept running into spaces that were either too small, too expensive, or both. What Kumara ended up settling for had been a number of things: all failed restaurants, most recently a pizzeria. This nondescript yellow building sits on a highway just outside of Beacon, a road sparsely populated with a couple bars, a wing joint, a few gas stations, and a minor league baseball stadium. For Kumara, it was perfect. He loved the Hudson Valley, particularly for its natural beauty.

“Up here, it’s so beautiful. I fell in love with this area. I even choked up a little bit the first time I came here, it was so beautiful,” said Kumara.

Beacon is already home to a large number of restaurants for being a relatively small town of 14,000. On Beacon’s Main Street, one can eat greasy grub at a neighborhood bar, or down a “craft” burger made from Hudson Valley beef, or slurp ramen to the sounds of live jazz. One can also dine at an upscale farm-to-table establishment. But before 2014, one could not eat Sri Lankan food in Beacon. That didn’t come until Kumara decided to change things up a little bit at The Red Pepper Diner—to “introduce himself,” he said.

While he would continue serving omelets, pancakes, burgers, chops etc., Kumara began offering a Sri Lankan buffet on Friday nights. Within about one month, Kumara couldn’t keep up with the demand for his Sri Lankan specialties. He said he was serving up 50-100 people during each Friday buffet. Thus, Kumara expanded the Sri Lankan buffet service to Saturday and Sunday as well. Now he serves the buffet for those three days, while offering Sri Lankan dishes on the regular menu, as well, alongside the commonplace diner dishes.

The Red Pepper Diner’s impact hasn’t stopped at bringing Sri Lankan cuisine to Beacon. Instead, Saman Kumara has fostered a tight-knit community with his clientele, one replete not only with the basic signifiers of friendship—friendly greetings, firm handshakes, and genuine inquiries about life’s happenings—but to playdates with his kids and those of his clients. The past two years have also seen holiday trips to Sri Lanka—with five fans of the Red Pepper Diner coming along. All of this has blossomed thanks to Kumara’s decision to introduce his new home to his cuisine.

Kumara’s most popular Sri Lankan foods are his black curry and his “deviled” dishes. The black curry is named such because the spices used are roasted before the curry is made, which gives the dish a darker color than most other curries. The unfamiliarity of his cuisine to most of his customers gives Kumara a way to introduce himself, not just as a cook, but a host, a teacher, or even a friend.

“If someone doesn’t know what a dish is, I just explain it. That’s what helps build a relationship with the locals,” said Kumara. “They are my guests, not my customers.”

Often Kumara compares Sri Lankan cuisine to Indian, since the latter is decidedly more familiar to most Hudson Valley residents. These cuisines, however, do share some similarities. After all, Sri Lanka is a 270-mile teardrop of an island about 50 miles off the coast of southwest India. Sri Lankan food, on the other hand, contains far less dairy than the varieties of Indian food offered in the Hudson Valley. Sri Lanka’s cuisine was influenced not only by that of nearby southern India, but by Indonesia and the Netherlands as well, mostly due to trade. Kumara said that the European influence found in Sri Lankan food comes in the form of chicken and lamb.

One of the differences between Sri Lankan food and that of the Indian subcontinent is the roasting process of the spices used. Kumara notes that variations of Indian cuisine are known to “temper” spices in ghee before cooking, but in Sri Lankan cooking the spices—cardamom, cumin, coriander, clove, black pepper, and more—are roasted longer, and are therefore darker in color. This gives the black curry its distinct appearance.

Elsewhere on the menu, a word like “deviled” might strike fear into the heart of ovophobes. It’s a word that likely brings to mind deviled eggs, one of the two foods known to be “deviled” in American cooking (the other, of course, is ham). But the deviled chicken, lamb, and vegetables at the Red Pepper Diner bear no resemblance to finely minced pork spread or boiled eggs. Instead, the result of “deviling” is similar to a General Tso’s Chicken-type coating, but less dense and sweet. The deviled chicken is Kumara’s most popular Sri Lankan dish.

According to Kumara, his clientele are not accustomed to the true spice level of Sri Lankan cooking, so he alters his food accordingly. In other words, he holds back on the chilis. On the slight chance any Sri Lankan customers stop at the Red Pepper Diner, Kumara treats them like he would anyone else, but with a slight difference.

“Most of my guests are locals, but if Sri Lankans come in I have to...explain the situation,” said Kumara. That’s because his food is made to suit white American tastes, at least where capsaicin is concerned. After all, the American Community Survey does not register any Sri Lankans living in Beacon for 2017.

Thus, with Sri Lankan food being unfamiliar to many in the area, stories of finding the Red Pepper Diner are often of lucky discovery with happy endings. Ian Cook, for example, lives in Beacon with his family, and for years had always driven by the space The Red Pepper Diner exists in today, had always known the restaurants that were there. But when the Red Pepper Diner opened in 2014, Cook didn’t expect the food to be any good. The building had always been home to bad restaurants.

“I was like, ‘screw it, let’s just see how it is,’” said Ian Cook, who took his wife and two children.

Cook now eats at The Red Pepper Diner once or twice a week, alternating between his favorite Red Pepper dish: deviled chicken with a side of coconut sambol, a kind of dry chutney, and a burger, which Cook said is the best in Beacon. But oftentimes he isn't just coming to satisfy his stomach—he's coming to satisfy his soul. Not by any god. But through a friendship begot by good food.

"It feels really nice coming here, coming here with my kids, seeing Saman," said Cook. "We're kind of like family now...We set up playdates with our kids about every other weekend."

The same story is true for many other diners. On any given weekend, Kumara will be manning the buffet, stirring trays full of food, and making rice flour crepes (hoppers) fresh for each of his guests. When the buffet isn't calling, he's walking around the dining room, talking to his guests about Sri Lankan cuisine, often directing guests to a map of that hangs on the wall next to the buffet.

Kumara has made enough friends running The Red Pepper Diner that he's organizing a third holiday trip to Sri Lanka with friends he's met through serving them. They're set to leave Dec. 26.

"I came into this world with good Karma," said Kumara. "I'm going to go out with it too."

A Shawarma Shop Succeeds Where Pizza is Prominent: Mohegan Lake's Almadinah Market

By Kevin Wheeler

The Almadinah Market sticks out in Mohegan Lake. On a half-mile stretch of U.S. Route 6, where one can stop to eat at a diner, an I-hop, one of three pizza places—or a pizza hut—it has the only storefront completely covered by posters of Middle Eastern food. The only way to see inside is to get up close and look through the spaces between arms width size pictures of gyros, kababs, falafel, and shawarma. A “Keep Calm and Eat Halal” sign covers half of the front door, beckoning the few pedestrians who walk this traffic-heavy part of town.

Ahmad Alwadi, 48, opened Almadinah in 2011, primarily as a Halal butcher shop and grocery store selling products from the Middle East. Even today, its shelves are stocked with big cans of harissa, jars of tahini, and boxes of tea adorned with Arabic calligraphy.

But in 2013, Alwadi started serving his homemade falafel, and later chicken shawarma over rice—an NYC street cart staple. Pretty soon the orders for his falafel greatly outnumbered the orders for meat, so Alwadi scaled back the butcher shop and expanded his menu, which now features kibbeh, bulgur patties stuffed with ground beef and onions, hummus by the tub, and his wife's baklava, sold in pieces not much wider than postage stamps.

Almadinah is the only restaurant of its kind in Westchester above White Plains, about 25 miles to the south, and the only one before Poughkeepsie, about 35 miles to the north. In this region of the Hudson Valley, Almadinah has no true analogue: an establishment where a customer can buy a shawarma wrap or platter, with a drink, for under \$10. There are other Middle Eastern restaurants in lower Westchester—Persian in Elmsford, Turkish in Mount Kisco, and even Beacon But when Alwadi committed to the restaurant side of Almadinah, he gave northern Westchester its best option for Middle Eastern food.

“The community needed something different than pizza, so I figured to bring (Middle Eastern food) upstate,” said Alwadi. “I opened this place for people who love food.”

While Almadinah is in Mohegan Lake, a small census-designated place of 6,000 residents, Alwadi lives in nearby Peekskill, where he moved with his wife to raise his two daughters.

Much of Alwadi's food is homemade. The only items that are not are non-Middle Eastern items like chicken tenders, onion rings, french fries. Alwadi said that these items sell well, too despite his making his own falafel, shawarma, and freshly grilled kababs.

Though he now runs a small restaurant, Alwadi was once an engineering student at the University of Alabama. That all ended when the Gulf War broke out. Alwadi's family, from Kuwait, became broke, and they no longer afford to keep him in school.

With little other recourse, Alwadi chose food. He moved around the country, picking up restaurant experience at a steakhouse in Birmingham, AL and a restaurant similar to Almadinah in Phoenix.

According to Alwadi, it was his falafel that has allowed him to become successful selling Middle Eastern food. However his customers order their falafel or shawarma—plate or wrap—Alwadi dresses his a little differently than what you'd find at a New York City Halal cart. Instead of the ubiquitous “white sauce” poured over Halal cart food, Alwadi douses his wraps and platters with a tahini sauce made from lemon and garlic. Purple pickled turnips add salt and a change of texture, akin to softer heart of palm, to the familiar duo of chopped lettuce and diced found in Halal platters and wraps.

While Falafel may have spurred the shift from butcher shop to restaurant, Alwadi considers shawarma his specialty. He roasts lamb and chicken over a rotating spit in his kitchen, which he will show you a picture of on his cell phone if you ask about how he cooks the shawarma.

Though Alwadi does spit-roast all of his meats, you may hear some sizzling coming from the kitchen if you order shawarma at Almadinah—sounds that suggest meat cooked on a griddle, not sliced off a tiny, spinning tower. Because Almadinah is a small counter-service establishment, Alwadi finds it too expensive to keep the spit running all day—it's a gas guzzling appliance, he said. Such are the struggles of a small shawarma shop. To save food—and money—Alwadi sometimes slices up the shawarma in advance, and freezes servings to be used in wraps and platters later. While this practice may sound suspect, wouldn't know the difference between the fresh shawarma to the re-heated shawarma from taste and texture alone.

Alwadi said his food attracts a diverse clientele. “Americans, Indians, Pakistanis. Greeks too—similar food. It's a mix,” said Alwadi, of his customers.

Despite the hard work involved in running a business solo, Almadinah is open every day from 10:30 a.m. till 7:00 p.m. (5:00 p.m. on Sundays).

“It's the grind, working and not having time off,” said Alwadi about the toughest part of operating Almadinah.

For Alwadi, hard work begets a sense of pride: he displays four “People love you on Yelp” certificates on the wall next to his cash register. He said Almadinah has grown more successful every year, and that he'd like to expand into a full-size Middle Eastern restaurant—with spits spinning all day.

“I feel pretty special,” said Alwadi, of being the only Middle Eastern restaurant. “I'm glad I can be able to serve my community, and serve my food.”

Giving Its Community a Taste of a Former Home: Cocina Oaxaqueña

By Kevin Wheeler

Hector Bautista was 14 when he crossed the border at Tijuana. The crossing marked the end of a days-long journey by bus and train from his home city, Oaxaca, in southern Mexico. Following his father, who had arrived in the United States 14 years earlier, in 1984, Bautista eventually settled in Kingston, NY where his father had found a job building furniture. Bautista said he doesn't know exactly how his father landed in upstate New York from Tijuana. If anything, he said, the reason is one that often links immigrants of all backgrounds: work.

"You go wherever there's work—you follow the jobs," said Bautista. "Even if it's miles and miles away."

The teenage Bautista found work in the diners that dot the roads between Kingston and Poughkeepsie, where he now lives. Bautista first started washing dishes; then he moved on to cooking in the kitchen. This work didn't satisfy Bautista. He wanted to be cooking more Mexican food—the kind he might find back in Oaxaca. Thus, Bautista saved up to open a restaurant of his own, with the backing of his family.

"My mother in law told me, 'You're always cooking at home. Why don't you open up your own restaurant?'" Bautista said.

And so, in 2015, after 17 years of working in kitchens around upstate New York, Bautista opened a restaurant in Poughkeepsie, *Cocina Oaxaqueña*. His aim was to feed Poughkeepsie's growing Oaxacan community, and he's doing that now by serving hard-to-find dishes like *tlayudas*, which are large, tortillas topped with refried beans, Oaxacan cheese, avocado, lettuce, tomato, and any meat of one's choosing. Bautista also *mole negro* from scratch. For him, cooking this way became a necessity when faced with Taco Bell.

"My family was getting tired of going out for Mexican and always finding Tex-Mex," said Bautista. "There's not a lot of spice in that food, you know? We want to give the community what they want when they go out for Mexican."

Cocina Oaxaqueña sits on Poughkeepsie's Main Street, a busy thoroughfare that reflects a diverse populace in its storefronts: a Mexican clothing store, an African supermarket, a Soul Food restaurant. According to the 2017 American Community Survey, people of Hispanic background make up one of Poughkeepsie's: about 18 percent of Poughkeepsie's 30,505 residents is Hispanic, with about 7 percent being Mexican. In a town the size of Poughkeepsie, 2,500 is not a small number, and the Oaxacan community in particular is large and defined, with its summer *Guelagueta* dance festival attracting thousands in recent summers.

Bautista said he is dedicated to serving the Oaxacan community (and Mexican, in general), and he prides himself on his cooking that recalls home for many of his customers. One of which is mole negro, the famed Mexican sauce that looks like the dark stuff of some delicious netherworld. Bautista can't say exactly what goes into his mole, only that his contains about 40 different ingredients, two of which he imports from Oaxaca: the herbs pitona and hoja santa. Bautista also imports fresh tuna from Oaxaca, to make tuna nieve, similar to a sorbet. Bautista and his staff, many of whom are family, make all of the desserts at Cocina Oaxaqueña: flan, churros, and an assortment of nieves, including leche quemada, or burned milk, which recalls dulce de leche.

Of course, the tuna nieve is made from tuna the fruit—not tuna the fish. Tuna is a kind of red prickly pear that is commonly found in variations of Mexican cuisine. It's sticky, sweet, and tastes a little bit like a cross between a pear and a strawberry.

Bautista has done well enough with Cocina Oaxaqueña that he plans to expand his business to one or two new restaurants in upstate New York or Connecticut.

“When you cross the border, you're looking for a new future,” said Bautista. “It felt good to find mine.”