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By JEFF GORDINIER

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TASTES LIKE HOME

Across the Hudson, Closer to India



Finding One's Own Masala: Floyd Cardoz, executive chef at North End Grill, searches for inspiration by returning to his Indian roots, finding spicy, sweet and sour flavors in two New Jersey towns.

EDISON, N.J. — Floyd Cardoz was scanning the shelves at a supermarket called [Apna Bazar Cash and Carry](#), looking for inspiration. “I will come here and I’ll see an ingredient that I haven’t seen in a while, and it will remind me to do something new,” he said on a muggy Saturday.

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Mr. Cardoz, the executive chef and a partner at [North End Grill](#) in Manhattan, had no problem finding examples. In recent years this part of New Jersey, a swath of Middlesex County west of Staten Island, has become a magnet for families with roots in India.

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Nadav Neelam for The New York Times
Clockwise from top left; shopping for groceries at Apna Bazar in Edison, N.J.; Floyd Cardoz and his wife, Barkha, eating lunch at Jassi Sweets Center; Mr. Cardoz sampling the Indian buffet at Karaikudi Chettinad Restaurant; and a worker making dosa at Dimple's Bombay Talk.

A food boom has followed. Restaurants and shops in towns like Edison and Iselin are overflowing with regional specialties rarely seen or tasted in other parts of the United States. And Mr. Cardoz, 52, who grew up in Mumbai but now lives a short drive away from this nexus of Indian-American culture, often makes a point of swinging through town to reconnect with the flavors that, in his youth, got him excited about flavor in the first place.

At Apna Bazar, he employed not only his eyes but also his nose. “Asafoetida,” he said, mentioning a slightly skunky-scented spice, and spotting containers of the Vandevi brand that used to be a staple in his mother’s pantry. “I can almost smell it through the packaging. As soon as I walked in, I smelled it.”

He pointed to a tawny chunk of what looked like maple candy. “This is palm sugar,” he said. “I’m using palm sugar with my crab salad right now. I think that’s what makes it a little more complex.”

He saw the dried apricots that he had lately woven, at North End Grill, into a duck dish. He picked up a bag of poha. “In India this is eaten as a cereal or a snack, and it’s made out of rice,” he said. He’s been using poha to create a flaky crust on a halibut filet. “Like most chefs, you want to use some ingredient that people haven’t seen before.”

At first glance, his menu at North End Grill may look resolutely, even stodgily Heartland America, stocked as it is with offerings like heirloom tomato salad and grilled sweet corn and eggs with bacon and grits. What keeps Mr. Cardoz’s handiwork captivating are the surprises, many of which can be traced back to his subcontinental roots. For example, he said, “seeing mustard oil, and remembering it, and using it instead of wasabi in my tuna tartare.”

But Mr. Cardoz and his wife, Barkha, like to do something else when they head for Edison and Iselin: eat. A lot. Their Saturday visit hinged on not one but four successive lunches, each showcasing a different area of culinary mastery.

At [Jassi Sweets Center](#) they had the featherweight samosas that Mr. Cardoz likes to comfort himself with when he comes home from work at night. They drank sugar-cane juice that was made, on the spot, by grinding shafts of cane through a machine that extracted their sweet nectar.

It had to be downed right away; the liquid gets funky quickly. “In about half an hour it’ll turn color,” Mr. Cardoz said.

Next came an array of crispy snacks (bhel puri, sev puri, pani puri) at [Dimple’s Bombay Talk](#). Then vegetarian dosas and rice dishes and idli (dense but fluffy rice-and-spice cakes) at [Swagath Gourmet](#). It pained Mr. Cardoz to leave anything unconsumed. “In my family, we never wasted rice,” he said. “Wasting rice, for me, is like blasphemy.”

The afternoon's finale was a big Indian buffet, featuring dishes like fish curry and goat-bone soup, at [Karaikudi Chettinad Restaurant](#). Mr. Cardoz was swooning. "This is one of the better fish curries that I've eaten in this country," he said. "It's just so balanced."

He was also sweating. It was an insane amount of food, and at some spots the owners brought a merciless series of extras. "That's Indian hospitality," Mrs. Cardoz said. "If you say no, you have to eat more."

Still, Mr. Cardoz never stopped thinking of fresh ways to translate what he was eating. He had liked that touch of ginger in the sugar-cane juice. "I may use ginger with pineapple," he said.

In one way or another, India remains a presence in everything he creates. "That's what I tell all young cooks," he said. "If you want to cook anything in another cuisine, then you first have to know what your own cuisine is about."

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