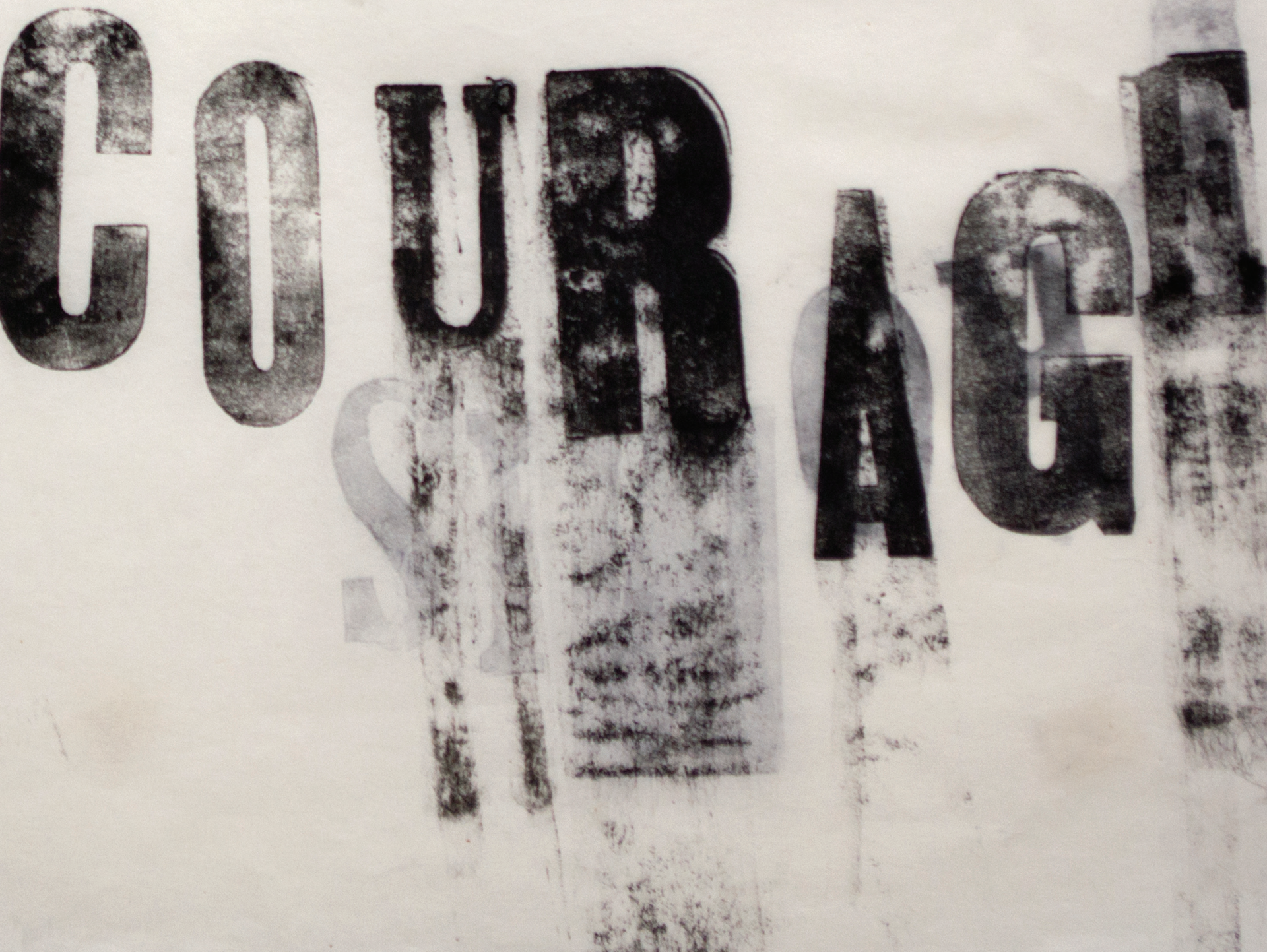


Chronogram

ARTS.CULTURE.SPIRIT.



Understated Authentic CINNAMON

by Marie Doyon photos by Roy Gumpel



By 5:02 pm on a Sunday afternoon, people are already flooding into Cinnamon in Rhinebeck, which opened its doors for dinner moments before. An easy elegance permeates all aspects of the restaurant, from drinks to décor and, of course, food. It is decidedly upscale, but unpretentious features like the heavily attended Sunday dinner buffet (\$19.50) and the 20-foot communal table create a friendly feel.

For a country whose languages number in the hundreds, deities in the thousands, and residents over a billion, India's cuisine has been rather crudely abridged for the Western palette. Cinnamon comfortably sweeps aside American notions of what an Indian restaurant "should be," carving out its own identity. It does not scramble to prove its authenticity, demonstrating instead the subtle mastery that is the foundation for its freedom and improvisation.

Co-owner and chef Chaminda Widyaratna left Sri Lanka at 18 to train as a pastry chef. He worked throughout Europe, in Dubai, and on cruise ships for several years before moving to Connecticut in 2006 to work at his friend's restaurant Coromandel Indian Cuisine. He arrived without any experience, but there he learned quickly under the tutelage of a chef from Kerala.

While working in Connecticut, Chaminda reconnected with his now-wife Shiwanti, a distant acquaintance and the daughter of family friends. At the time, Shiwanti was in fashion marketing for Tommy Hilfiger, traveling regularly between the US and India. They began meeting up whenever she was stateside, and in 2009, they were married.

When she moved to Connecticut, Shiwanti began studying nursing, and Chaminda continued cooking at Coromandel. He started talking about his dream of opening a restaurant. "He wanted to do it himself and create his own dishes," Shiwanti recalls. "He was always talking about it." Shiwanti remarks with a laugh, "If you asked me about starting a restaurant now, I would say, 'What about this? What about that? What about the regulations?' But at that moment I just said, 'You want to do it? Let's do it.'"

In June 2010, they opened Cinnamon in an inconspicuous roadhouse on Route 9 just south of the village. Cinnamon's innovative style established a loyal fan base

quickly. By January 2016 they had grown enough to open their current location on East Market Street, in the space formerly occupied by the bistro Arielle.

Whereas most Indian restaurants ply you with a predictable list of Sub-Continental All Stars (ahem, vindaloo), Cinnamon offers a tour of almost every Indian state. The menu boasts dishes from Goa, Kerala, Rajasthan, Punjab, and specialties from Chettinad in Tamil Nadu, Bombay in Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh, and Odisha. You'll find Persian, Parsi, and Pakistani influences to boot.

"We wanted to do a diverse mix and serve unusual Indian food. Sometimes we make our own twist with our own spices. Filet of seabass (Machili Tandoor, \$27), flavored with ginger and garlic and grilled in the tandoor with vegetables—that is one of our best sellers. One of Chef's creations," she says proudly. ("Chef," of course, is her husband, Chaminda.)

The specials and the lunch menu are where Chaminda's creativity shines, with innovations like the Bombay Burger (ground lamb patty, spices, pickled onion relish on fresh naan, \$11), Masala Sawa scallops (\$25), Tandoori lamb chops (\$28), Shrimp Quinoa Biryani (\$22), and more.

Cinnamon takes great care in sourcing its ingredients. "I am a healthy eater and I like to source my vegetables as locally as possible," Shiwanti says. "If it can be organic that's ideal. My whole policy is that food should be freshly made and affordable. I don't want to be high-end. I want to be upscale." Accordingly, nothing at Cinnamon is frozen or microwaved. Everything is made fresh, on site.

This sustainable sourcing takes significant effort and research. For chicken alone, they called a dozen suppliers before ultimately bypassing the distributors and creating a direct purchasing agreement with Campanelli's, a small pasture-raised chicken farm in Sullivan County. "It is worth it because we can give that advantage to our customers. Quality at a reasonable price." The only thing from far away is their halal, grass-fed New Zealand lamb, which they selected for its world-renowned quality.

Though the dishes will likely sound unfamiliar, the menu has something everyone, with chicken, seafood, lamb, and vegetarian entrees. For carnivores,



Clockwise from top left: The long table in the dining room encourages intimacy; filet of sea bass grilled in tandoor; the dining room, fabricated by local firm The Art of Building in collaboration with owner Shiwanti Widyaratna, has a contemporary farmhouse feel; the Bombay burger (ground lamb patty, spices, pickled onion relish on fresh naan, served with a salad). Opposite: Shrimp biryani.

the Boti Kebab (\$11) is a succulent starting point. This lamb appetizer from India's southeastern coast is marinated in ginger and garlic for 24 hours before being grilled in the tandoor oven. For a lighter intro, the salad dosa is a creative twist on the savory south Indian crepe, filled with arugula, chickpeas, and chili flakes and topped with pomelo star anise dressing.

For vegetarians, the Saag Paneer (\$15) is an easy main course recommendation. Made in-house with local spinach and milk from Hudson Valley Fresh, this dish literally melts in your mouth. Defying all logic, the spinach sauce is as good as the cheese curd. If Tikka Masala is your go-to, try subbing the Rajasthan Murghi (\$19), a far more interesting tomato chicken dish, seasoned with ginger, garlic, garam masala, and chilies. (Pro tip: This dish is still delicious three days later eaten with fingers right out of the fridge.)

Shiwanti worked with the Rhinebeck firm The Art of Building to design the restaurant's interior. Aside from the hand-lettered Devanagari script encircling the room ("You have to dream before your dreams can come true," and other quotes from beloved politician A. P. J. Abdul Kalam), Cinnamon has the feel of a contemporary farmhouse—wainscoting, painted beams, butcher block tabletops, modern Edison bulb light fixtures, and a marble-topped, purple-paneled bar. She let slip that they are decorating the upstairs currently, which will debut as an Indian-style tapas and cocktails lounge in early April.

Speaking of cocktails, the drink list is enough to tempt even the strictest teetotaler. Shiwanti shakes her head. "When people think about Indian food they don't associate it with wine, beer, or cocktails. Either Indian restaurants don't have it or if they do, they are not focused on it." Not so for the Widyaratnas, who worked with consultant Matthew Kelly to develop their killer beer and wine list. Aside from the requisite Kingfisher and its sidekick Taj Mahal, their bottled beer comes entirely from New York State. While concise, the selection covers all the basic beer groups: porter, pilsner, pale ale, and IPA.

The wine list is extensive, with rosé and prosecco from Italy, Malbec from

Mendoza, classic California reds and whites, and more. About half the options are available by the glass, with prices ranging from \$9 to \$11. Bottles are between \$24 and \$65 (the latter price for a South Indian Sangiovese).

"We have seriously great cocktails too," Shiwanti adds proudly. All in the \$10 to \$13 range, you probably won't be drinking these all night, but with exotic choices like the mango chili margarita (\$12), it's worth the splurge. Wintertime favorites include the chai spiced whiskey sour (\$12), made with egg whites and Tuthilltown whiskey; and the cinnamon hot toddy, made with Taconic Bourbon. If you're in town for weekend brunch, Cinnamon serves up a deliciously distinctive Bloody Mary (\$13); garnished with a masala olive, it packs the heat of the house vindaloo hot sauce.

Aside from marketing and management, Shiwanti runs the front of the house. A gracious and attentive host, she circles the restaurant throughout service, schmoozing with guests, many of whom she knows on a first-name basis; decrypting the menu for newcomers; offering suggestions; checking how things are.

In an alchemical feat of flavor and flare, Cinnamon manages to be both authentic and innovative. Chaminda is able to make all the classics, but at heart he is a creator of new dishes. When asked about his evolution as a chef, he says, "First I learned all the authentic spice mixtures and recipes from the different regions. Then my dream was to add my own twist."

Though it's probably not the first spice that comes to mind when you think of Indian food, cinnamon is in every curry powder and masala mix you've ever tasted. The restaurant's name embodies its approach—unexpected, understated, and fundamentally authentic.

Cinnamon

51 East Market Street, Rhinebeck
(845) 876-7510; Cinnamoncuisine.com