

CASA, TASTE, TRAVEL AND LIFESTYLE

Vogue LIVING

EDITED BY ANINDITA GHOSE



Kehar was part of
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SPOTLIGHT

LA CHIC AYURVEDA

What happens when a talented French-Canadian chef explores Ayurveda to strengthen ties with her Indian roots? A dinner at New York's prestigious James Beard House. AARTI VIRANI samples **NIRA KEHAR's** spread and returns awed

My initial impression of Nira Kehar, the first female chef of Indian origin to cook in Manhattan's iconic James Beard House, comes in the form of a raspberry that floats atop a slender shot glass. "Think of it as an alcoholic prasad," explains the 33-year-old Kehar. The beverage in question is actually a heady punch made from curdled and clarified milk—not exactly an ingredient you'd associate with a welcome drink. It's a brave way to kick things off in a hallowed kitchen (once home to America's favourite epicure) that has since hosted legends like Nobu Matsuhisa and Daniel Boulud. Though Beard, a prolific chef and food writer, passed away 30 years ago, his New York brownstone has become a revered culinary centre, honouring both established and emerging chefs through a series of exclusive dinners.

It isn't just the idea of a pre-dinner cocktail that Kehar, who until recently ran Delhi's celebrated French-Canadian brasserie Chez Nini, is determined to transform this evening. As a gourmand who introduced poutine and duck confit to the Indian capital, she's put her eclectic signature on everything from tonight's check-in process, where a server ties a beaded scarlet string onto my wrist ("The bracelets are auspicious and I wanted a thread to bind everybody") to the ceilings strung with over a dozen jewel-toned kites, bringing a sliver of Mehar Chand Market to Greenwich Village.

Nearly 80 fellow diners—including designers Rashmi Varma and Charles Warren, and New York-based architect Komal Kehar—and I cluster in the lush Beard House courtyard for hors >



The welcome drink of clarified milk and raspberry



Kehar in the kitchen

d'oeuvres as the smoky scent of incense—another Kehar touch—clings to the air. We're treated to a silky chickpea cappuccino (it's served in an oversize teacup) and delicate oyster petals dressed with rose vinegar, in addition to one of the more shock-and-awe inducing offerings of the evening: tendrils of marinated lamb brain, which Kehar dubs "popcorn," topped with a lemon-saffron mayonnaise.

To varying degrees, the dishes that are trotted out that night are all gentle nods to Kehar's whimsical culinary journey. She exhibits an especially fierce connection to her Québécois beginnings (she was raised in Montreal, Canada), claims a past life as a computer engineer (where she clocked 80-hour weeks at a San Francisco start-up) and abandons a traditional chef's coat for hand-woven cotton saris (the outfit of choice for her Beard House appearance, however, is a navy-blue kha-

di and silk Rashmi Varma ensemble with a smattering of mirror work on the shoulders). It's hard not to single out the decidedly Indian ingredients that make guest appearances on the menu: masoor dal, okra, Kashmiri garlic and coconut flakes, just to highlight a few. "Funnily enough, I don't know how to cook Indian food at all," insists Kehar, who was trained at Montreal's highly acclaimed Institut de Tourisme et d'Hôtellerie du Québec. "When I first got to India in 2006, a lot of the ingredients featured on today's menu made me feel like I couldn't do 'my food'," she reveals. "But then I was like, 'What is this arrogance?' What is 'my food' even?"

Yet each of Kehar's Beard House plates, whose order of appearance is steered by a flavour sequence for which she consulted an Ayurveda expert, have an unmistakable balance about them: the lentils, which make up the very first course, are served with a rustic pumpkin emulsion and simmered in a liquid made of fermented leeks, carrots and zucchini. Then come three types of caviar, perched on charred squid head, and a quintet of preserved veggies that is each paired with a designated purée (the highlight included a spinach, tarragon and lemon version, drizzled on a pickled potato), appropriately titled 'The Secret Garden'.

As the Sancerre is swapped for Syrah, diners dig into finger millet gnocchi and mackerel fillets resting on a pool of cashew milk, followed by a rich lamb roulade. "I don't believe in meat always having to be the star of the dish," confesses Kehar, who is a vocal proponent of the nose-to-tail treatment for everything, be it lamb or a zucchini. "For me, nature is perfect."

The bold young chef's concluding act



The decor included paper kites strung to the ceiling



Oyster Petals (charred onion petal, tamarind purée, rose vinegar)



Five vegetable preserves and pickles

for the night, which is served on treated bronze skewers that she created herself alongside a metal artisan in Delhi ("I'm the worst business person because even at Chez Nini I was always designing matching crockery," she admits with a giggle) is a sweet and tangy coconut cake and rum-braised pineapple combo. Washed down with a few sips of oaky Amrut single malt, it makes for a bitter-sweet—yet potent—finale. ■

SIX PACK

Kehar consulted an Ayurveda expert to determine the flavour sequence of the dinner at James Beard House

Sweet
THE GREAT MOREL
An amuse-bouche of pumpkin brandade and fermented lentils

Sour
THE SECRET GARDEN
Five vegetable preserves and pickles paired with a purée

Salty
THREE CAVIARS OVER CHARRED SQUID HEAD
Okra carpaccio and Kashmiri garlic-coconut tapioca

Pungent
GNOCCHI À LA PIERRETTE
Finger millet gnocchi, salt 'n' pepper mackerel fillet, cashew milk, raisin oil

Bitter
NESTED LAMB
Pulled lamb roulade, pistachio sabayon and pomegranate

Astringent
PINEAPPLE TAPESTRY
Coconut sponge, vanilla and rum-braised pineapple