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Mysterious Supper Club Serves Up Gujarati Food Spiced with Stories

By SARAH KHAN FEBRUARY 14, 2012 12:41 AM



Madame Geeta, hostess, “Hush” supper club in Washington, D.C.

I’ve always been a slave to intrigue — I was raised on a steady diet of Nancy Drew novels, and secret passwords, hidden passages and cryptic clues were my domain. So when I heard about Hush, an underground dining experience in Washington, D.C., the pint-size sleuth still lurking within me was immediately on the case.

The [Web site](#) reveals the basics: Hush is an Indian-inspired supper club, held at the residence of one masked Madame Geeta whose last name is conspicuously absent, and an evening of storytelling and vegetarian food is promised. A donation of \$75 is requested at the end of the meal, and diners are welcome to bring their own wine or beer. I reserved a spot and received an e-mail confirming my seat at the supper, but with crucial details — an address, for example — to follow only on the day of the event.

I liked the sound of this already.

Shortly after 7 p.m. on a Saturday I arrived at my destination in D.C.’s U Street neighborhood. I knocked and was greeted by Kaci, who, much to my dismay, neglected to ask me for the secret password. (It was “saffron,” according to that morning’s missive). I joined my fellow diners in the elegantly appointed living room awash in blues and beiges and dotted with eclectic Art Deco and mid-century modern accents. Awkward small talk over cocktails ensued while we wondered what would happen next.

What unfolded was an evening of seemingly never-ending courses of authentic Gujarati Jain cuisine, peppered with anecdotes and laced with heavy helpings of history, all set to the lilting strains of a Taal soundtrack. The woman of the hour was petite and in her late 30s,

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with a cherubic face and an ebullient personality. “I started Hush because of one thing: India is on the move,” Ms. Geeta declared. “I want to get America and India to know each other, to take the two-dimensional view of India and make it three-dimensional.”

Ms. Geeta began Hush on Valentine’s Day two years ago, as the result of the usual series of twists and turns that lead to most great ideas. After her father died, a few weeks before her 30th birthday, she became gripped by a desire to preserve her heritage, not knowing how long she would have her mother in her life. “I had this anxiety that I wouldn’t know how to make her dhokla,” she recalled. “I started cooking all the time, to mitigate this fear that things were going to get lost.”

Despite a long career in such quintessentially D.C. institutions as the World Bank, Ms. Geeta was also something of a serial entrepreneur — “I’m Gujarati; business is in my blood,” she said with a laugh — and a chance mention at a party led to her spending a late night feverishly researching underground dining experiences. She launched a Web site on a whim while snowbound during one of that winter’s worst blizzards, and suddenly found herself featured on the area’s top food blog; the Washington Post and other major media outlets jumped on the story, resulting in 300 reservations in a matter of days — all before she had even served a single guest.

More than 500 mostly happy diners later, Ms. Geeta has perfected her formula to an art. She proudly unveiled kachori, pulao with kadhi, spinach parathas, makai no chino, masala chai and more, serving each with a story conveying its historical context (the heat that characterizes Indian food today was only introduced in the 1500s by the Portuguese, who brought peppers from their South American conquests) or sprinkled with a fun anecdote about her mother, known around the convivial table as Mama Geeta. Even a tale about her server breaking her foot that afternoon, leading to a series of mishaps in the kitchen, is relayed with narrative finesse.

Halfway through the evening she led us to a hallway where she had set up a pseudo street cart, and re-created the experience of an authentic chaat stall in India. Later on, she invited us back to the living room to take us on a spice tour, relishing in sharing with us the secrets of an Indian masala dabba. It’s here that Ms. Geeta made the night’s biggest reveal: In an eloquent soliloquy about the core values of Jainism, she explained that the nonviolent principles of the faith led to one of the key aspects of Jain cooking: the absence of root vegetables like garlic, potatoes, or onions. On this evening, people seemed to take this disclosure in stride. In the past, said Ms. Geeta, guests had actually jumped in shock. “All that gasping, I love it!” she said.

Now this was true dinner theater. “I decided the best way to tell a story is by feeding people, delighting them, and making the story delicious,” she said.

Most Hush attendees come in couples or groups of two or three, but solo diners are more than welcome, and are likely to head home with a few new friends. The 10 guests on this night ranged from



Sarah Khan for The New York TimesA “Hush” supper at Ms. Geeta’s residence.



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PhDs to finance professionals and, except for my friend and me, were all white — the standard makeup of most of Ms. Geeta’s dinners, which fits in well with her goal of educating the uninitiated. New devotees of Jain cuisine are created over helpings of capsicum tinged with jaggery and besan. “As a vegetarian, I eat a lot of Indian food, and it’s always the same dishes,” said a fellow diner, Mark Taparauskas. “But it was really nice not knowing what to expect tonight.”

But Ms. Geeta says some of her proudest moments have occurred when other Indian-Americans — people that even Mama Geeta was surprised to hear were attending, asking, “Why would they come? Don’t they have mothers?” — were thrilled to see what she was doing to put an underrepresented cuisine and culture in the spotlight. “It’s very important for me not to have my people be treated as a circus sideshow,” she said. “This was not meant to be any professional goal for me, but then I realized I could do everything I’ve dreamed of, I could put Jains on the map.”

Mystery solved.

Sarah Khan is an editor at Travel + Leisure magazine in New York. You can read more of her work [here](#) or follow her on Twitter [@BySarahKhan](#).

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