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Restaurant carves out reputation in unlikely place

By JEN RICHMAN

When Solmon and Rokeya Chowdhury opened Taste of India-Shanti restaurant in Dorchester 10 years ago they knew they would have to compensate for the city's reputation as having tough neighborhoods in order to get patrons in the door. What they did not know is that after a decade their restaurant would become a fixture in the community.

When the couple first opened the eatery, the cards appeared stacked against them. Solmon and Rokeya say that the challenges of the neighborhood's somewhat rough-around-the-edges reputation and being one of the first South Asian restaurants in the area made it a good spot to test their business savvy.

"It was a difficult introduction into the neighborhood. Dorchester was known for its burgers and french fries," said Rokeya. In fact, when the couple's friends realized the Chowdhurys' intention of opening their restaurant in Dorchester, they urged them to reconsider, said Rokeya. Their gamble paid off and the Chowdhurys are seeing as much business now than ever, they said.

Irish and Vietnamese immigrants gave the city much of its identity when the Chowdhurys first opened Shanti's doors to the public a decade ago. They add that as much as there is an increasing South Asian presence in Dorchester, their restaurant is still the only game in town.

Rokeya credits the worldwide popularity of Indian food for the restaurant's success, noting a diner from Ireland recently commented on the quality of food at the restaurant. According to her, the man likened it to Indian food in London — some of the best he had found.

The restaurant is open for lunch Monday through Saturday from 11:30 a.m. to 3 p.m. Dinner hours are Monday through Wednesday from 5 p.m. to 10 p.m. and Thursday through Saturday from 5 p.m. to 11 p.m. Shanti seats 44 and offers catering to groups of 30 and above.

Menu items are a mix of Indian, Pakistani and Bangladeshi fare: a full range of naan, including Aloo Naan, stuffed with potato; Keema Naan, stuffed with seasoned lamb; and Peshwari Naan, stuffed with raisins and nuts. Among entree options are Tandoori Shrimp, Tandoori Salmon and Garlic Lemon Kebab. Vegetarian specials include spiced okra and tomato dish Bhindi Masla, the spiced lentil dish Dal Makhani and spiced seasonal vegetable dish Mixed Vegetable Curry. Diners looking for American-style appetizers can choose from chicken or tomato soup, as well as a garden salad. Lunch items consist of dinner items, offered on a rotating basis.

A tandoori and curry chef staff the eatery.

According to Rokeya, customers who were once wary of visiting Dorchester for a bite to eat now comment how glad they are to have come to Shanti.



Rokeya said that when the couple bought the space, there were few, if any, ethnic eateries nearby. Now, Asian and Latino restaurants line Shanti's Dorchester Street location.

Self-described "foodies," Solmon and Rokeya indulge their personal taste through culinary exploration while they keep Shanti's menu laden with Bangladeshi and Indian classics.

Despite having no formal culinary training, Solmon cut back on a once full-time real estate business in order to devote himself to Shanti and Om, the couple's other restaurant in Harvard Square. "I don't know how to cook, but at least I can come in and sample," he said.

Part of he and his wife's success comes from longtime community connections the couple has made over the years, Solmon said.

Solmon was born in Bangladesh and came to the United States at the age of nine.

Rokeya has lived in India and Bangladesh, but spent much of her childhood in Belgium. She has a bachelor's degree in health science from the University of Massachusetts, Boston, and is now working on a master's degree in nutrition.

Their own business success does not diminish the Chowdhurys' sense of community involvement, or their commitment to challenging perceptions of Dorchester.

On a recent Thursday, Rokeya attended a meeting of local business owners whose goal is to heighten the community's interest in patronizing Dorchester establishments. The couple says that although their client base is an ethnically diverse one, attending meetings is a good way to overcome some of the stigma attached to the city.

The Chowdhurys are working on opening Moksa restaurant in Cambridge's Central Square.



Rokeya and Solmon Chowdhury, below, went against popular advice when they opened Taste of India-Shanti in Dorchester 10 years ago, but the restaurant has been thriving and has attracted consistent local patronage. Photos by JEN RICHMAN

For more information about Taste of India-Shanti restaurant, visit www.shantiboston.com.