

## **Cricket Parantha: creative Vancouverites incorporate insects into contemporary Indian cuisine**

By David George Gordon, 8/14/11

One of the high points of my 15-year career as a bug chef began with a phone call from Meeru Dhalwala, who, along with her husband, Chef Vikram Vij, owns and operates Vij's, an extremely popular restaurant in Vancouver, British Columbia.

A lightweight in the Pacific Northwest's burgeoning food scene, I was thrilled to be speaking with the co-owner of Vij's. *The New York Times* has called this impressive and hip establishment "easily among the finest Indian restaurants in the world." Relying on local ingredients and fresh ideas, Vikram and Meeru have consistently drawn accolades for their imaginative creations that, whenever possible, are made from sustainably reared or ethically wild-harvested ingredients. Their menu offers exotic entrees such as Garam Masala-sauteed Portobello Mushrooms, Lamb "Popsicles," and Savory Jackfruit Curry. Vij's does not take reservations, so, typically, the line of customers forms an hour or more before the doors open for dinner.

Over the phone, Meeru explained that she'd recently read an article in the *New York Times*' Sunday Magazine, describing a conference hosted in February 2008 by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations in Chiang Mai, Thailand. The article presented the argument that eating insects could reduce world hunger, especially in emerging nations. It quoted Dave Gracer, an entomophagist and personal friend from Providence Rhode Island, who'd attended the conference. Meeru was moved by Dave's statement that (to paraphrase) eating insects is like riding a bicycle, while eating beef or pork is like driving an SUV. She phoned Dave, seeking advice about adding insect dishes to her restaurant's seasonal bill of fare. Dave, in turn, suggested that Meeru contact me. She and I spoke again by phone before I agreed to drive to Vancouver (about four hours to the north of my home in Seattle) to discuss edible bug options for Vij's.

A week later, I met with Meeru, Vikram, and some of the staff of Vij's. For taste-testing purposes, I'd brought samples of dried European house crickets, Mexican chapulines, and king meal worms in zip-lock bags, along with some live wax worms in a plastic carton, primarily for show. We passed around the samples, talked about diners' perceptions, and cautiously weighed the pros and cons of each kind of edible item. At the end of this discussion, there was general agreement that a cricket dish would be easiest to make and most probably the best received by the restaurant's customers.

Meeru started to seek out a Canadian supplier of crickets but, after several unsuccessful calls, wound up buying hers from Reeves Cricket Ranch, across the U.S. /Canada border in Everson, Washington. "We discovered that the crickets were raised on apple feed," she wrote in her second cookbook, *Vij's at Home: The Warmth and Ease of Indian Cooking*, published in 2010 and containing the recipe for Spicy Roast Crickets in, of all places, the book's seafood chapter.

On their own, Meeru and Vikram put their minds together and created the recipe for what they eventually named Cricket Parantha. Live crickets from Reeves would be frozen, defrosted and rinsed, then seasoned with Indian spices and roasted in a 350-degree oven. The seasoned, roasted crickets would be allowed to cool before they were ground into a powder using a food processor. Then they'd be blended with chapatti flour and baked to make a form of parantha — a traditional Indian flatbread, in this case with an entomophagical twist. The flatbread would be stuffed with a mixture of onion, turnips and other ingredients, cut into bite-sized triangles, and served as an appetizer to Vij's clientele.

“We'll know we're on to something if we can get our customers to enjoy a dish with both crickets *and* turnips,” Vikram told me with a grin.

Word of Vij's Cricket Parantha spread rapidly throughout Vancouver, attracting attention from the local, then national, and eventually the international press. A few weeks before the dish's unveiling, a producer from ABC-TV's *Nightline* phoned me on a related matter and decided to send a film crew to Vancouver to capture everything —the restaurant's Punjabi-speaking kitchen staff roasting and grinding the crickets, the diners' responses to the new dish and, finally the segment host, Neal Karlinsky taste-testing the hors d' oeuvres, and giving them “an enthusiastic thumbs-up” (<http://abcnews.go.com/Nightline/story?id=5424627&page=1>). As a participant in the filming, I was among the first “outsiders” to try this new treat. Paired with a glass of Muscat from one of Vikram's favorite British Columbian wineries, it was unforgettably scrumptious.

Judging from the 12-minute *Nightline* segment, attendees at dinner that night had mixed reactions to the new appetizer : while several said they were pleased by the opportunity to try what they perceived as a delicacy, others winced at the notion of eating a bug in any form. Still, the ABC video crew's summation was largely positive. As Karlinsky observed on-air, “...crickets ground up and served as a delightful appetizer do seem to have their place at the table in a small but growing number of restaurants.”

“We were filling about two dozen orders in an evening,” Meeru recalls. “Everything was going great, until a reporter—we don't really know who—complained to the Vancouver health department. We had been so focused on the new dish that we neglected to notify them. That was entirely our mistake.”

To comply with city inspectors, Vij's voluntarily removed its Cricket Parantha from the menu, giving time for Vancouver Coastal Health to conduct tests on the crickets in the dish. “They asked us for a sample of two crickets — one raw and one roasted — for their laboratory tests,” Meeru recounts.

The tests revealed the presence of bacteria on the dead, uncooked cricket, just as one might expect in a sample of raw chicken or beef. But as experienced with these more

conventional forms of protein, the cooked cricket showed no such signs of bacterial life. Clearly, the process of baking destroyed any germs.

“The health authorities were polite and quite extremely open-minded about the whole thing,” says Meeru. “They asked us to post instructions, written in Punjabi, in the restaurant’s kitchen, telling our crew how to properly handle the \crickets to eliminate any chance of cross-contamination.”

In less than a week, Cricket Parantha was back on the menu at Vij’s. It remained there through the July and August, until it and other summer treats were ousted by fall menu choices. On several occasions during that period, Meeru called out to her fellow restaurateurs and chefs asking them to explore the notion of adding insect dishes to their menus. Alas, nobody rose to the challenge. Meeru says she’d try incorporating insects in some of her dishes, but only if she do business with a supplier of sustainable ingredients. To that end, she has been working with members of the entomology department of the University of British Columbia in Vancouver and continues to consult with Dave Gracer and me.

Meeru confesses that she received a few cranky phone calls and perhaps overly impassioned emails (in one instance, complaining that by adding vermin, Vij’s had corrupted India’s classic cuisine). Regardless, she says the experience was one of the highlights of her career.

“It’s no great accomplishment to just do what everybody else is doing, to not take risks or stick your neck out about the things you cook,” she explains. “But if you can present people with new ideas and introduce them to healthy new foods, now that’s something. To my way of thinking, that’s what it’s all about.”