

OUTSIDE THE KITCHEN

Chef: Shiva Natarajan

Residence: Manhattan

Restaurant: Raasa Indian Cuisine, Elmsford, plus Jaipore in Brewster and six Manhattan restaurants including Chola

Shiva Natarajan's revamped restaurant needed a name. "Malabar Hill had been there so many years; I wanted to renew it," he says. "I wanted it to reflect the spirituality of my life, of all that I've experienced." In India's Tamil language, *raasa* translates as essence of being. Perfect. Raasa it would be.

When Shiva Natarajan was growing up, his family was devoted to Swami Sivananda's Divine Life Society. "My grandmother was a disciple, and my mother worked with Mother Teresa," he says. "Ours was a house of charity for the poor; on weekends, people would come from all over, and my grandmother would cook for them." Being middle class, she had helpers in the kitchen, and one of the most enthusiastic was 8-year-old Shiva. His duties: frying onions, making chutneys, and hand-grinding semolina into paste for porridge. "I was passionate about learning," he says. "I'd ask a lot of questions; no one else in the house really bothered." And there was a perk. "I didn't have to clean," he chuckles. "We had people to do that."

When it came time to choose a career, though, there was no easy way out. In his house, two options existed, and both were nonnegotiable: doctor or engineer. Young Shiva didn't want either. "I wanted to be an actor or director. My father was an accountant, but his passion was writing and directing plays. And when I'd go with him to rehearsals, my mother would cry like someone had died." It would be up to Shiva's brothers to pursue the expected paths. His path took him across the world to Westchester, where his aunt and uncle had moved and were prospering as, yes, doctors. His dream was theater, but his reality was business school. "I thought I'd go back to India with an MBA and make my mom happy." Were it not for evening and weekend work in restaurants, he might have. Waiting tables for pocket money, Natarajan ended up in the kitchen after his shift watching the chefs. "I understood the basics of cooking and felt there

Chef Speak

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was pride in it." The idea of melding business and cooking sparked, and after graduation, when he was working for tech and investment firms, that spark ignited. His MBA had brought him employment, not fulfillment. "I felt this was not my kind of job; that I was wasting time. I'm good at creating things, writing storylines, solving problems." Restaurants, he realized, were theater, entertainment. They would be his stage. He opened his first location with partners in Westport, Connecticut, and then went solo, opening six Thai places in Connecticut, Manhattan, and Westchester. With cultural authenticity and hospitality as mantras, Mexican, American, and Indian venues followed. Then, in 1998, a hit. Chola, his Indian flagship in Manhattan, earned two stars from the *New York Times*. The spotlight blazed with media appearances, interviews, articles. "I was on top of the world," he beams. "I loved that the restaurant was busy, that we had celebrities coming in." Over the

course of 12 years, his restaurants numbered close to 20. He leans back to consider. "I was crazy."

Natarajan is now in his 50s, married with two teenagers, and ready for his second act. Highlights from his script's rough draft: a line of ethnic sauces and a production plant; completed screenplays; culinary sojourns to France and Spain; a trip to India with his children. "Now is the time to do something with passion again," he muses. "You have to grow in life, and I want to see what else I can do. It's time to move on." He pauses, his face brightening. "If I fail, I can always open a few more restaurants." —*Diane Weintraub Pohl*

As of press time, Natarajan had indeed moved on and sold his restaurants to Michelin-starred chef Hemant Mathur.

SPICE RACK

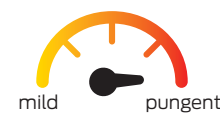
Discovering unusual spices and herbs, one jar at a time

[**Land Cress**]



aka American cress, cassabully, early yellowrocket, treacle mustard, upland cress

Flavor Strength



Description: Similar in appearance to its better-known (and less pungent) aquatic cousin, watercress, land cress is a biennial herb that grows in almost any soil—provided it's cool and damp—and can even flourish indoors (kitchen gardeners take note). As a member of the mustard family, land cress has a peppery bite and heat not far off from horseradish. The glossy green leaves resemble curled parsley and are often used in soups, salads, egg dishes, and sandwiches (especially tea sandwiches).

Regional Use: Travel south of the Mason-Dixon line, and you'll find land cress is known as creasy greens or creasies, and the whole plant is often stewed with ham hocks.

Pair With: Cress complements buttermilk, cucumber, egg, goat cheese, mushrooms, potatoes, rice, roasted meats, tofu, tomatoes, and yogurt. —*JBT*

SIZZLING...

Calabrian Chili Peppers

HEATING...

Thai Chili Peppers

FIZZLING...

Ancho Chili Peppers

