

NO 19 FULL-SERVICE RESTAURANTS : SETTING AMERICA'S TABLE

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CHICAGO CONNOISSEUR

Master Sommelier Alpana Singh helps brand her city as a culinary destination.

ESR May '15

NO. 19

Master Sommelier
Alpana Singh
opened Seven
Lions in February.

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FEATURES

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BY CONNIE GENTRY Alpana Singh discusses her successful Chicago restaurants and the need for more female restaurateurs.



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LEADERSHIP PROFILE

MASTER SOMMELIER ALPANA SINGH OPENED HER SECOND CHICAGO RESTAURANT, SEVEN LIONS, IN FEBRUARY. THE MODERN CLUBHOUSE CONCEPT HAS A DECIDEDLY AMERICAN FOCUS, WITH ALL WINES FROM AMERICAN PRODUCERS.



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HEAR HER ROAR

BY CONNIE GENTRY

ALPANA SINGH WANTS TO SEE MORE FEMALE RESTAURATEURS—WOMEN WITH THE ATTITUDE AND INITIATIVE TO TAKE OWNERSHIP OF OPPORTUNITIES.

TELL HER SHE CAN'T DO SOMETHING

and Alpana Singh embarks on a mission to prove her mettle. Not that she needs anyone to fuel her fire—her accomplishments are a testament to self-motivation. At 26, she became the youngest woman to pass the final level of the Master Sommelier exam, and in December 2012 she opened The Boarding House, Chicago's first Master Sommelier-owned restaurant.

A hands-on operator, Singh, 38, now owns two restaurants, ran her first marathon last year, and says her next big run may be for public office.

Within days of opening Seven Lions, Singh talked with *FSR* about her newest concept and the significance of being a



LOUP DE MER WITH P.E.I. MUSSELS AND SPICY TOMATO BROTH.

ANTHONY TALLER

female restaurateur. "We are in an industry where women have made such an important contribution, but we don't see it reflected in ownership. We see female chefs; we see female managers; but we don't often see female restaurateurs," Singh says.



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To change that, her advice to women is simple: "Show up for everything. Offer to do tasks that may not seem within your purview, just volunteer for everything."

It helps to work in a culture that encourages growth and empowers employees, certainly the case at The Boarding House, staffed entirely with female managers, and at Seven Lions, where women and men alike hold leadership roles.



SALT COD BRANDADE WITH POTATO CHIPS AND CARAMELIZED ONIONS IS A SIMPLE SNACK THAT IMPRESSES DINERS AT SEVEN LIONS.

Regardless of gender, Singh says, preparing to own a restaurant requires a willingness to do it all and an eagerness to master every aspect of the business. "Volunteer to learn the numbers, because at the end of the day, running a restaurant is about numbers. Whether it's learning to do the payroll or reviewing invoices or attending meetings, it's about learning the back end of the business.

"Sometimes we get a little ahead of ourselves and think, 'I'm too good to learn how to run the door or too good to bus tables,' and really that's what ownership is all about. It's getting your hands dirty in every aspect of the operation."

The first order of business, she acknowledges, is to find mentors you can learn from, and she has had her share of outstanding teachers and opportunities—from Chef Jean JoHo who brought

her to Chicago to work at Everest to the years she spent working for Rich Melman at Lettuce Entertain You. More recently she's developed a professional friendship with John Coletti, managing partner of Gibson's Restaurant Group, and she's found inspiration in women like Maguy Le Coze, owner of Le Bernardin, and Shelley Lindgren from A16 in San Francisco.

"I remember the first time I went to Le Bernardin and saw Maguy Le Coze, I

thought, 'I want to be her,'" Singh says. "Female restaurateurs are a rare breed, but they're a special breed."

Sommeliers are also a special breed, and Singh's passion for wine strongly influences her restaurants. While her first restaurant was focused on wine and the goal to be staffed by women, the focus at Seven Lions is on creating a classic clubhouse motif with all things Americana, including the wines.

"The entire wine list at Seven Lions is from American producers," Singh explains. "The American wine industry has made great strides in the last 15 years in offering wines that have more diversity and interest. It's not just Pinot Noir and cabernet and Chardonnay; there are things like Gruner Veltliner and Malbec. ... Interesting, esoteric grapes that previously were only available in their European counterparts are

being grown by ambitious winemakers in California, Oregon, Washington, New Mexico, Michigan, and New York—and that should be applauded. If winemakers are going to take a leap of faith and plant something like Brunello grapes, we should encourage that ambition. That's what sommeliers should do; they should reward that ingenuity, and it's a win-win because customers are very excited about it."

Helping to motivate that guest enthusiasm are servers and staff who have been trained in the wine selection. That staff training pays off far beyond wine sales, as Singh notes it also increases employee retention.

"We have an incredible education program at Boarding House—pretty much everyone on staff has taken the introductory sommelier exam, probably 40 percent have taken the certified exam, and two servers are waiting to take their final exams. I think that's pretty good for a restaurant that's only been open 26 months," Singh says. "We would like to do something similar at Seven Lions to encourage our staff to further their wine education; it's good for them and makes them feel like they're adding value to their life. But it also shows in the sales."

As for the value in her own life, Singh says she is doing exactly what she wants to be doing—and don't ask if balancing work and home meant difficult choices along the way. The answer is an emphatic "No."

"I'm hoping the day will come when I no longer get asked that question," she says. "It says if you are a successful businesswoman but you don't have children and you're not married, well then you must have made sacrifices. Because women should have it all—it suggests I'm not complete."

Touché for the lady who measures her accomplishments in the successes of those around her, like helping lead the campaign to welcome the James Beard Awards to Chicago, and the potential that The Boarding House executive chef Tanya Baker, a finalist for Rising Star Chef of the Year, could be the recipient of one of those awards. ■



NEW CONCEPTS

HALF CHICKEN
WITH
FAVA BEANS,
CARROTS,
AND GERMAN
SPAETZLE.



Seven Lions

OPENED: February 2015

LOCATION: 130 South Michigan Avenue

OWNERS: Alpana Singh, Matt Fisher, and John Ward

EXECUTIVE CHEF: Chris Curren

CHEF DE CUISINE: Patrick Russ

PASTRY CHEF: Karianne Soulsby

AVERAGE CHECK: \$24 lunch; \$38 dinner

MENU: American clubhouse cuisine, with American wines.

● Inspired by the cultural amenities and vibrancy surrounding the location, Alpana Singh opened Seven Lions in the historic People's Gas and Coke Building, which has more than 50 ornamental lion motifs on its façade. The name, however, is a tribute to her heritage (Singh is derived from the Sanskrit word for lion) and her late grandmother who referred to her seven children as her lions. The concept of a modern American clubhouse was chosen because the style of food is classic and the dining experience fits every occasion. "Come for a burger and beer at the bar, to impress clients over lunch, or to celebrate a special event—a clubhouse caters to every need," Singh says. The dining room seats 85, the bar seats 30, private-dining enclaves can seat another 80–95, and an al fresco patio serves 70–80.



A LARGE PHOTOGRAPHIC COLLAGE OF CHICAGO IMAGES BY ARTIST GAIL MANCUSO FORESHADOWS THE INTENT FOR SEVEN LIONS TO BECOME AN ICONIC EATING DESTINATION IN THE WINDY CITY.



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