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A LITTLE EMPIRE THINKS BIG

by Abby Luby

Mount Kisco plays host to
an outgrowth of concept eateries





Salmon-Lentil Crepe, from Little Crepe Street in Mount Kisco

PHOTOGRAPHS BY CHRISTINE ASHBURN

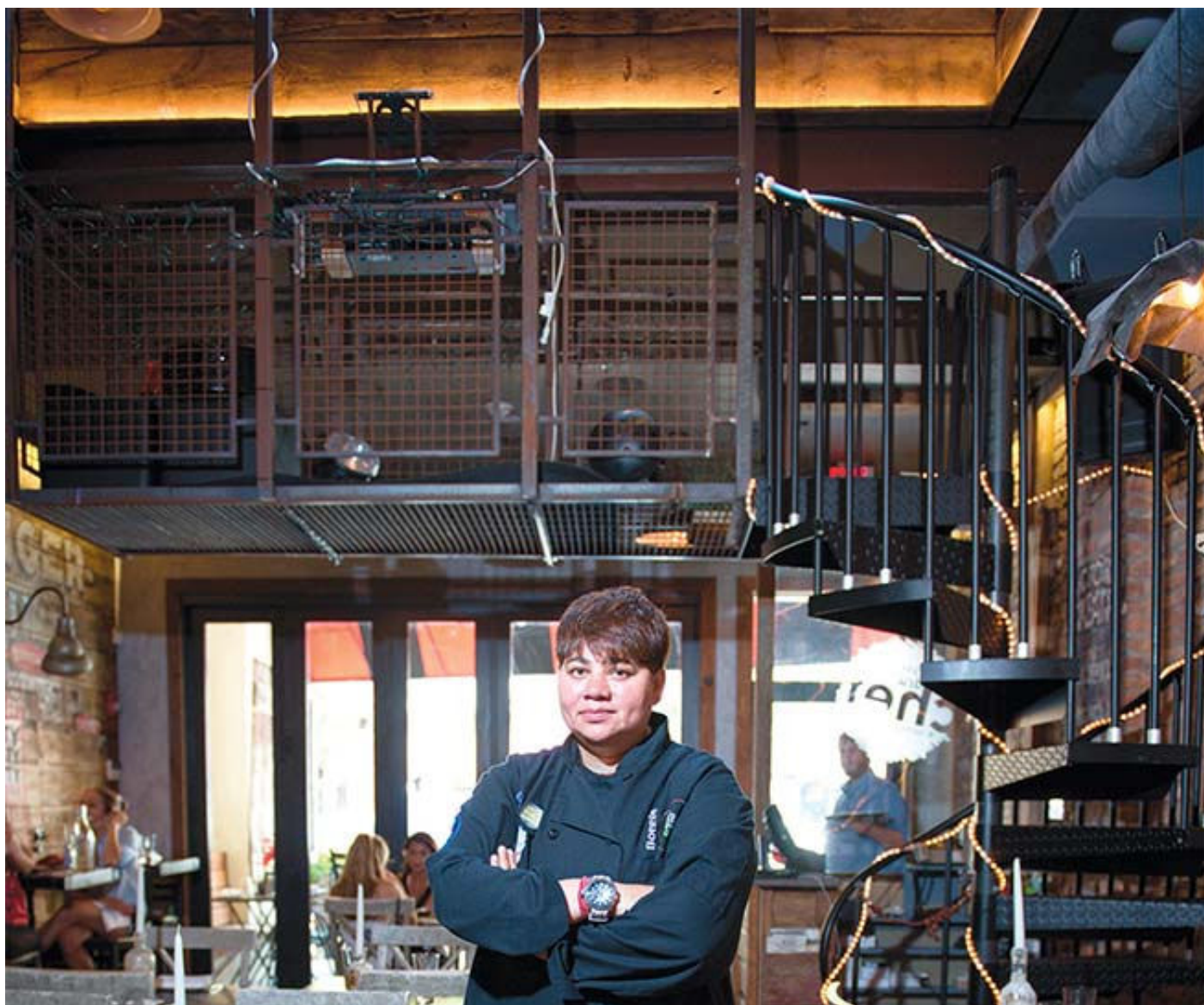
Intuition tells us to start small before going big, especially in the food business. The adage is one held by restaurant owner Bonnie Saran, who opened a string of Westchester eateries in the last six years, collectively known as the “Little Empire” of restaurants. This empire includes Little Spice Bazaar, Little Crepe Street, Little Kabab Station and Little Drunken Chef, all of which are within a stone’s throw from each other on East Main Street in Mount Kisco. There’s also the Little Mumbai Market in Pleasantville.

How Saran ended up owning all the “Littles” is a story in and of itself. She hails from a town near Mumbai, India, where her dad was in the Indian army (she often refers to herself as an army brat) and her mother cooked for various regional concession stands and local movie theaters. “We helped her every morning,” Saran recalls, “starting early around 4 a.m., preparing sandwiches and burgers to be distributed. By 10:30 we were done.” Although her college major was stage and set design, Saran had a strong entrepreneurial streak coupled with a business sense, and while still in India, she successfully promoted brands for such multinationals as General Motors, Coca-Cola, Yamaha, Pepsi and Corona. When she came to this country, she never envisioned owning a small chain of restaurants, but a serendipitous series of events led her to opening

her first place, Little Kabab, in February of 2011.

“It was a fluke,” Saran says, remembering how she stopped for lunch at a small, rather dingy deli on East Main Street in Mount Kisco and noticed it was poorly run. When she learned that the place was for sale, a rush of ideas she had about the local cuisine became a flood of possibilities. “I wanted a place that would meet my own personal tastes particularly since all the takeout places around were either Chinese food or pizza. I asked myself, ‘Why not Indian food, too?’”

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youngest to the oldest person.”





Owner Bonnie Saran overlooking her mini-empire

Small Wonders

Saran sold her apartment in India, purchased the deli and, with the help of two friends, began to transform what was a mere hole in the wall to a jaunty, energized space with an east-west decor, an artsy theme (possibly informed by her turn in set design) that would later replay in her other restaurants. Three months after Saran bought the deli, Little Kabab opened, seating about 14 customers.

It was early 2011 and the great recession saw folks curbing what they spent on dining out. Key to Little Kabab's success was a low-priced takeout menu replicating the fare of food trucks in India; street food that was good and affordable. "I was always impressed by how street vendors appealed to everyone, rich and poor," Saran says. "We have a great income disparity here, but on the street that disparity is removed by the food trucks."

Saran knew that she had to promote a catchy brand that would reflect her new venture. The "Little" concept is reflected on the menu with "Little Bites" but also includes "Medium Bites," "Kabab Platters" and "Station Curries." It's food that caters to nibblers as well as the ravenous. The \$5 to \$6 Bombay Frankie Roll, a longtime favorite street food in India, uses hot grilled broad wraps with an array of meats and vegan fillings topped with scrambled free-range eggs, lemon, spiced onions and mint chutney.



A platter including Jamon + Manchego Croquetas, Smoked Salmon Open-Faced Sandwich, Moroccan Harissa Wings, Gambas Al Ajillo (all available at Little Drunken Chef in Mount Kisco), and an assortment of loose spices (available at Little Spice Bazaar in Mount Kisco)

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Opportunity Knocks

Just 10 months later, a photo shop two doors down from Little Kabab became vacant; Saran, needing more space to store her spices, moved in and called it the Little Spice Bazaar. “It was a really good deal,” Saran says. “But I couldn’t just use it for storage without making it profitable. It had to sustain itself.” She created a mini-marketplace selling loose teas and spices under the sign “Loose Spices with Good Character,” a nuanced nod to discerning palates. Also sold are products from India: rice, dried pulses, teas, soaps and incense. But selling these imported items alone still wasn’t going to make Little Spice Bazaar totally profitable, so Saran installed what has become a very popular juice bar whose biggest seller is the lassi, an Indian smoothie made with

yogurt (made fresh on the premises), fresh fruit and spices, among other ingredients—a refreshing drink staple in India, as well as here.

By then Saran realized that something else was happening. The restaurant and juice bar was a hub resonating an easy, symbiotic relationship between her and what was becoming a very supportive Mount Kisco community. “I am very loyal to this town and find many people here are loyal to me as well.” Her style of ‘give-back’ comes every year on Thanksgiving and Memorial Day when she invites veterans and those in need to enjoy a free plate of food at her restaurants. “I do it with my heart because it’s a two-way street,” she says. “For the last five years, volunteers have showed up to help out.”

About a year after she opened Little Spice Bazaar, another small space right next door became vacant. Within 24 hours, Saran signed a lease. At that time, Viktor Solarik, a local architect, became Saran’s partner and helped open the new venue. “The place had been a cigar store and reeked of smoke, so we had to gut it completely,” says Solarik. Saran and Solarik decided the main fare would be crepes, the popular street food in France.

“I never made a crepe before in my life,” admits Saran. “But I easily tapped into this community, talked about it with my Little Kabab customers and asked for their favorite crepe recipes. The feedback was great and many sent or brought in their recipes.” After experimenting with numerous recipes for a few weeks, she felt she had arrived at the perfect batter and invited customers to try the crepes for free so she could hear what they had to say. Meanwhile the space was being reconstructed and Solarik used pictures of France for inspiration. “We came up with festive colors and natural materials like the wood floor, exposed brick, exposed beams. It’s another small space with an open kitchen and seats about 20.” Saran wanted to create a mixed bill for the menu, offering crepes that are either savory or sweet. The savory crepes range from traditional fillings to more cross-cultural crepes like chicken tikka masala and a Middle Eastern version, while sweet crepes range from butter and sugar to chocolate grilled cheese with strawberry prosecco. Symbolic of breaking down borders, a doorway was cut in the wall connecting Little Crepe Street to Little Spice Bazaar allowing patrons to pair lassis with their crepes.

Two years later in 2014 Saran and Solarik opened the Little Mumbai Market in Pleasantville, about a 15-minute drive south from Mount Kisco. The market was another modest-size space refurbished with natural, unpolished, low-tech elements for the 20-seat bistro. “We used a whole bunch of recycled material, including old barn wood, old tires, and paint cans for lighting fixtures,” Solarik explains. “These common everyday repurposed materials achieve a kind of a playful, comfortable atmosphere where everybody can have a good time and get very good, inexpensive food.”

The storefront window sign announces “The streets of Paris meet the streets of Mumbai,” and the menu is a compilation of fares from Saran’s other eateries and also combines crepes and Indian street food.





Smoked Salmon Open-Faced Sandwich, from Little Drunken Chef in Mount Kisco

Street Cred

Saran saw how popular the street-food theme was and realized her business model was highly efficient. “Seventy percent of all recipes are made the same as they were on day one at Little Kabab,” she explains. Because the recipes are standardized, it allows Saran to use a rotation method for her staff, shifting chefs and cooks from one kitchen to another so they become familiar with the prep work for all the different menus. It was a system that worked for staffer Sammer Fabian, a young man who arrived in this country from Honduras about seven years ago. After graduating from Fox Lane High School in Bedford, he started to work for Saran at Little Kabab. “Training and working for Bonnie was very comfortable, and she makes everyone who works in her restaurants feel like family,” says Fabian. “She has pretty much kept the same people working for her since I started.”

Fabian was eager to learn more, and Saran made that possible. “Now I do prep in one kitchen, I am the grill cook in another, and I do food packaging and serve.” Diversity is key here not only on the menu but with the staff; many are from Central America, the Ukraine and Cuba, according to Solarik.

When Saran opened Little Drunken Chef in July of 2015, she was ready to take the leap from “little” to bigger. She signed a lease for the former Taverna Pandesia restaurant directly across the street from Little Crepe Street, in a space that is considerably larger. Saran could now expand to a more eclectic environment including a full bar bookended by a fresh oyster bar, a lofty DJ cage accessed by a spiral staircase, a sidewalk patio and seating for some 85 customers. Under the name on the outside door it says “#nameyourpoison,” and the appeal is not just for those wanting fresh oysters and the featured international tapas but for the younger set looking for a late-night place to hang out.

With a philosophy that everyone, no matter their income level, is entitled to good food, Saran’s Little Empire has become a local dining favorite and her customers run the gamut from high school students to joggers grabbing their lassis while running in place, to such celebs as Bill Clinton, Martha Stewart (who has written about Saran on her blog) and Ben Stiller who lives in Chappaqua. “I have lines of celebrities, students, young parents,” she says. “There is one basic rule: no one gets preferential treatment. Bill Clinton gets the same chipped dish as a kid. Everyone is welcome from the youngest to the oldest person.”

Saran is always seeking out new dishes to periodically change up her menu and that includes taking her palate on the road. Her recent trips have been to Turkey, Cancun and Vienna. “It’s 40 percent work and 60 percent vacation.”

Looking toward the future, she already has an idea brewing; something, she says, new and different. “It’s a concept that will have a ‘wow’ factor, but nothing fancy.”

Little Empire

29 East Main Street, Mount Kisco

914.242.0200

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About Abby Luby

Abby Luby covers Hudson Valley agriculture, health, art, local environmental issues. Her articles have appeared in The New York Daily News, SolveClimateNews, The Valley Table, Roll Magazine, and The Real Deal. She teaches writing and literature at Marist College

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