

Tea shop offers a sip of India in Livermore

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"Bombay" Nick Sabharwal strives for authenticity in the chai spice blends that he and his wife, Paula, grind, mix and brew at Bombay Nick's Chai bar, an oasis in a shopping center in Livermore.

The first thing that hits you when you walk into Bombay Nick's Chai Bar is the aroma.

Cardamom and cinnamon, clove and saffron, curry and star anise, and all other manner of exotic spices fill your nostrils. It's an olfactory wave that seems more suited to the streets of India than to the inside of a little shop in an unassuming shopping center on the outskirts of downtown Livermore.

This little slice of South Asia in the heart of the Tri-Valley is the work of "Bombay" **Nick Sabharwal** and his wife, Paula. They opened the store a year and a half ago, grinding and mixing the raw herbs and spices for their 40-plus tea and chai recipes in the back, while serving hot and cold drinks by the glass and to-go blends in the front. All of which, according to Nick, who was raised in Mumbai, formerly known as Bombay, are just about as close to the real thin

as they can make it.

"Chai in India when I grew up was just taking different spices and herbs, putting them in a combination of milk and water, add some cane sugar and tea leaves, bring it to a boil, strain it and drink," he says. "And that's what we do here. We get everything in its raw form, and we prefer to grind and blend it ourselves - no powders or fillers or syrups or mixtures."

Not only are the ingredients ground from scratch, but they're also mixed fresh by hand every few weeks to ensure maximum flavor. And yes, the couple admit that it's a laborious process that takes more time - but it's also why this is chai that tastes unlike anything you've ever had at Starbucks or Peet's.

"I always say that it tastes kind of like the Fourth of July, like fireworks. Your mouth pops when you drink it," Paula says. "And that's because the spices are real. Your palate will pick up all the different notes, it'll detect the fresh ginger, or the cardamom, or that black peppercorn. This is real chai like you would get in India. It's the real deal."

A couple's teamwork

Nick, whose gregarious personality and easy smile make him a natural salesman to curious customers, is the master blender. But it's his wife who comes up with all the recipes, which may come as a bit of a surprise, considering that unlike her husband, Paula did not grow up in India. She was raised in the Northeast in a German-Polish family, and never stepped foot in the country until Nick took her 17 years ago.

"I was struck by the simplicity and the beauty of the place," she recalls. "I was in this completely different world, and I was so overwhelmed that I remember standing on the beach and just crying because I never thought I'd be in another country like that. I've been cooking Indian food and making chai ever since - the flavors that woke my mind to a different experience."

Still, while she clearly exhibited a knack for mixing up various chai blends, it was only as an act of last resort that the couple thought to make a business out of it. In fact, they both remember

the exact date: Aug. 15, 2009. It was in the heart of the recession, and Paula's primary work, giving soft-tissue massage therapy, had dried up. Struggling to make ends meet, the couple had just spent an unproductive day trying to sell flax crackers at a flea market in Pennsylvania, where they were living at the time.

"So I went to bed that night and I said a prayer," Paula remembers. "And Nick told me later that he went to bed and said a prayer too, and on Aug. 16, 2009, I woke up and said, 'I think we should have a tea business.' "

They took their last \$200 and went to get packaging materials for their initial two blends. On their first day in business at a flea market, they made \$100. The next day it was \$250. Says Paula, "I remember saying, 'Oh my God, I think they like our tea!' "

Online business

It's been a steady climb since then. They first started an online retail business, Cardamom and Curry, which proved successful enough to enable them to open a storefront in the Bay Area, where Nick has family. And while the financial stability has been great, the deeply spiritual couple - they mix all their blends according to ayurvedic principals based on traditional Hindu wellness practices - say money is a small part of it.

"We wanted to do something that was unique and holistic," says Nick. "Even if the business stops here, at least for the past four years we've given people a taste of something that they'll remember."

They also take satisfaction in creating a place, with its soothing music, curry-orange walls, exotic scents and free-flowing chai, that seems to offer an oasis to the busy world outside.

"The teas are all designed for wellness, and we purposefully created our store with a very relaxing ambience meant to be calming," says Nick. "So in a way, what we're trying to do is to get people to come in, slow down for 15 minutes, and just enjoy an exceptional cup of tea. And then they can go about their daily business."

Bombay Nick's Chai Bar, 4010 East Ave. (near Hillcrest Avenue), Livermore; (925) 493-7044; www.bombaynickschaibar.com. Open daily.

Ethan Fletcher is a Bay Area freelance writer. E-mail: food@sfchronicle.com