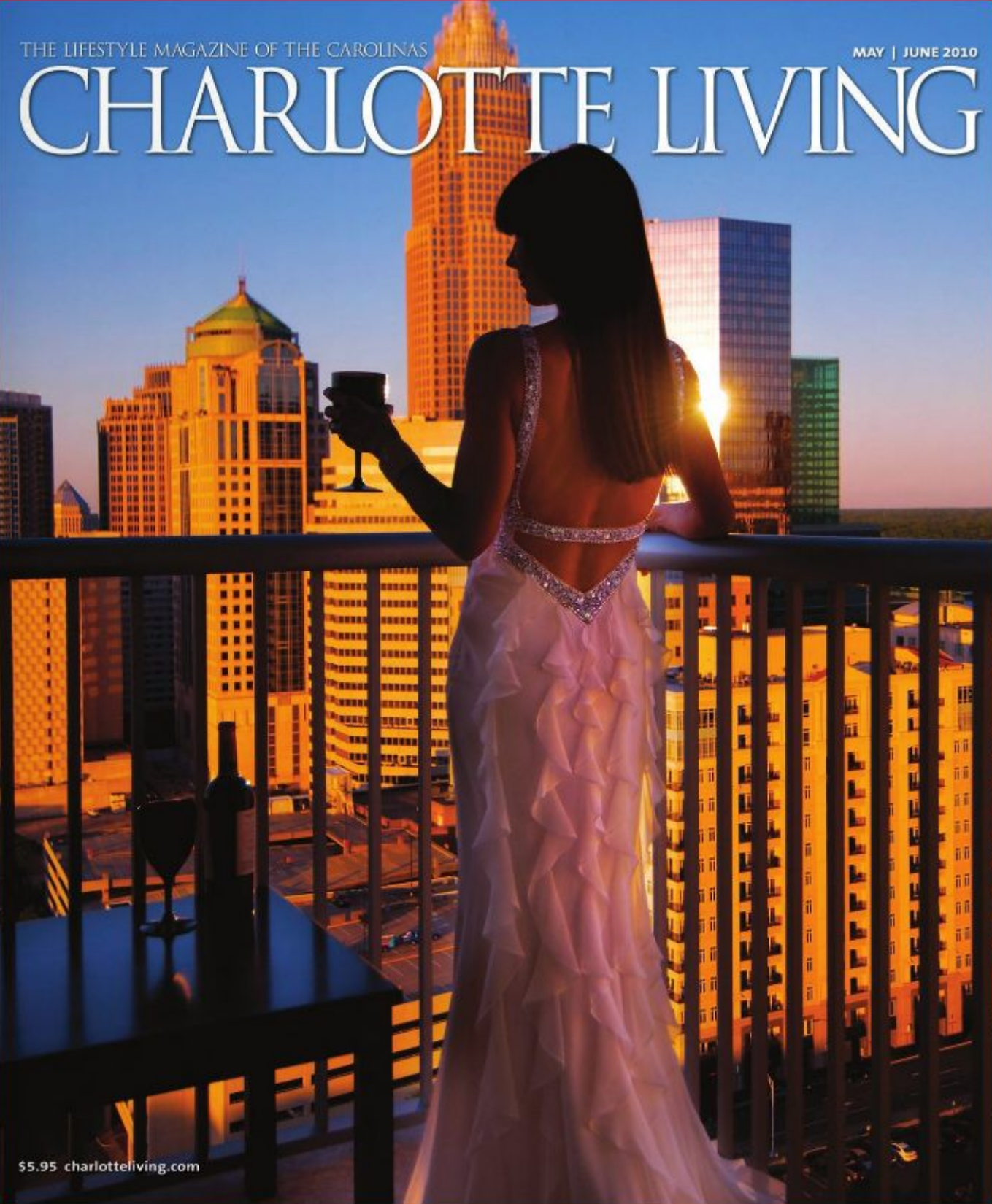


THE LIFESTYLE MAGAZINE OF THE CAROLINAS

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# CHARLOTTE LIVING



# Our New Blue Heaven

*The Blue Taj—an eclectic eatery charms south Charlotte*

TEXT BY HEIDI BILLOTTO PHOTOGRAPHY BY GERIN CHOINIERE

Restaurateur Aparappan Singh, known to friends as Pannu, came to Charlotte in 2005 to open a restaurant. Singh's plan was not to live here but just to set up shop and to commute from Roanoke, Virginia, where Singh owns Nawab, a very successful classic Indian restaurant.

This astute business man found available space on Charlotte's well-known East Boulevard restaurant row and Copper, a unique dining establishment with a deliciously modern mix of contemporary and traditional Indian cuisine, has been a hit ever since.

Internationally acclaimed chef Mel Oza worked as an advisor on the Copper concept, offering Queen City diners a unique, avant-garde modern Indian menu building on the traditional flavors and culinary techniques of classic Indian cuisine.

As time passed, Singh and Oza have watched our fair city expand to the south and wanted to expand their culinary horizons as well. The Ballantyne area seemed hungry for independently

owned restaurants offering well done fare at reasonable prices, but Singh didn't just want to open another Copper.

He and Oza again collaborated to develop an eclectic concept offering a mix of international cuisines in addition to their well-known, much-loved Indian fare.

The result of their efforts and imagination is The Blue Taj. Located at 14815 Ballantyne Village Way in the breezeway that leads to escalators up to the

Ballantyne Village Movie Theatre, this relatively new restaurant features a host of international cuisines in an ultra modern, eclectic and inviting setting.



APARAPPAN SINGH AND BLUE TAJ CHEF, KULDIP GILL



The brilliance of Singh's vision in re-planning the space once home to a pizzeria is in cleverly dividing it up into smaller, more intimate dining rooms and a separate bar. Each "room" is decorated with a different theme and a unique name. From a light clean Scandinavian dining area with calm blue walls and sleek seating arrangements called Qi or ChT (a Chinese word meaning "the natural energy of the universe"); to a more classic French bistro dining area known as the Parlor, featuring an oversized

baroque design handpainted on the walls with sheer curtain room dividers; to a much more modern industrial area called Leela; and the 1960s era pop art, light and airy Bubble Bar. If the weather is cooperative, you'll want to enjoy the fine cuisine at The Blue Taj, outdoors on one of two dining areas—an enclosed cabana called Oasis, featuring draped fabric and LED lighting or the open-air patio called Soleil. Any one of these areas can easily be cordoned off for a private dining experience, business meeting or party. This blend of interiors offers an eclectic mix of modern and traditional design—the same eclectic mix that is reflected on the menu at The Blue Taj.

## EXCELLENT EATS

While the interiors are fabulous, it is the food that will keep you coming back for more.

At lunch, the menu whets your palate for dinner offerings with downsized versions of many of the same dishes. The Chumichuri chicken sandwich on a wheat roll with red onion, romaine

lettuce and a specially created spiced pepper mayo is reflective of the Chumichuri rubbed Ashley Farms chicken breast and slow simmered gigante beans (giant lima beans, of sorts) served at dinner. Likewise the Chicken Tikka Masala with a basmati pilaf at lunch is a close cousin to the evening's offering of Chicken New Delhi style served with the same blended rice side.

The spicier side of The Blue Taj's menu is reflected on both menus with the peri peri cauliflower with a



honey-pear raita as a hot and hoppin' way to start a meal, while the spicy pork vin d'alto with root vegetables is a rewarding respite as a main course at lunch or dinner.

As for meatless fare, the slightly spicy tofu-vegetable green curry and mixed vegetable deep red sauced Makharwala have fast become two of this food writer's favorite vegetarian offerings anytime of the day.

**QUICK AS A WINK**

If the noon hour finds you in a hurry, there is no need to settle for unappetizing fast food or pass up on a meal altogether. Instead enjoy The Blue Taj's new Express Lunch served every weekday with vegetarian, chicken and seafood selections served with salad, rice, bread and a complimentary soft beverage for just \$9, \$10 and \$11 respectively. And you'll be in and out, if you must, under much more pleasant circumstances in less time than it takes you to wait in line at the drive through.

If you have time to linger with friends, you'll enjoy the fine service and relaxing atmosphere as well as the well-appointed wine list and wine-by-the-glass list offered at The Blue Taj. Do try the shrimp and scallop "stir-fry" with daily vegetables at lunch or the seafood medley with a hot sweet and sour glaze and oriental vegetables at dinner. The pan-seared salmon topped with a sichuan peppercorn sofrito and a side of curryleaf frites at lunch or the pan roasted Norwegian salmon with Allepy Ishtew sauce and spinach at dinner are also both quite good. If a steak or chop is what you had in mind, the pan seared filet mignon and the rosemary garlic lamb chops won't disappoint.

Other must-haves on the dinner menu for me all fall into the starter category of appetizers and salads. The black chickpea and mango chaat is a unique, refreshing slaw salad of sorts that will leave you craving more while the house chow with smoked salmon is much the same concept with a completely different list of ingredients; and the vegetable croquettes served with a chutney duo are among the best in town.

Expect dinner entrée pricing to run around \$15-\$23 while the regular lunch menu tops out at \$13. The Blue Taj also offers a prix-fixe, three-course dinner for \$24 every Sunday, Monday and Tuesday.

Look for drink specials each weekday including half-price off all wines regularly priced up to \$60 on Monday and \$5 martini specials on Thursday, Monday through Thursday appetizer specials from 5-6:30 p.m. feature offerings such as duck-mushroom taquitos and zesty shrimp saute. \*

For reservations call 704.369.5777. The Blue Taj is open for lunch Monday-Friday, 11:30 am-2 pm; and dinner Monday-Thursday, 5-10 pm, Friday and Saturday, 5-10:30 pm, and Sunday 5-9:30 pm. For more info visit [TheBlueTaj.com](http://TheBlueTaj.com).



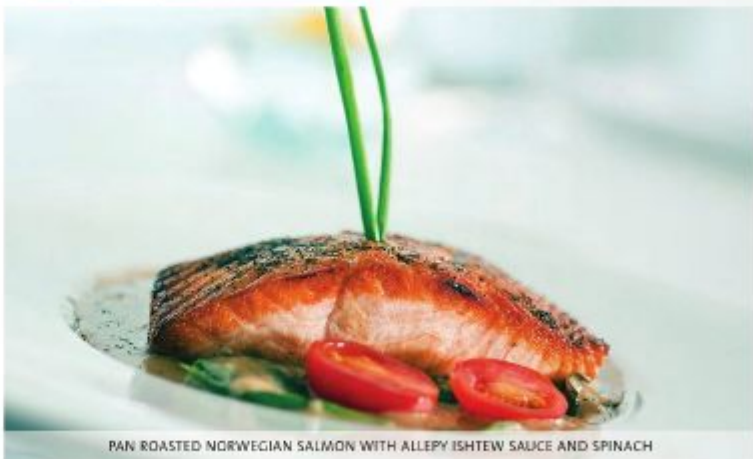
SPICY PORK VIN D'ALHO WITH ROOT VEGETABLES



CHIMICHURRI RUBBED ASHLEY FARMS CHICKEN BREAST AND SLOW SIMMERED GIGANDE BEANS



VEGETABLE CROQUETTES WITH CHUTNEY



PAN ROASTED NORWEGIAN SALMON WITH ALLEPY ISHTEW SAUCE AND SPINACH