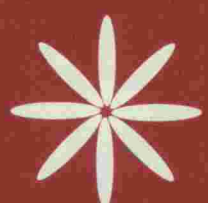


FEATURE



Story and images by VIVIAN ATTWOOD

SPICE IT UP

Durban's legendary Spice Emporium has undergone an exotic transformation.

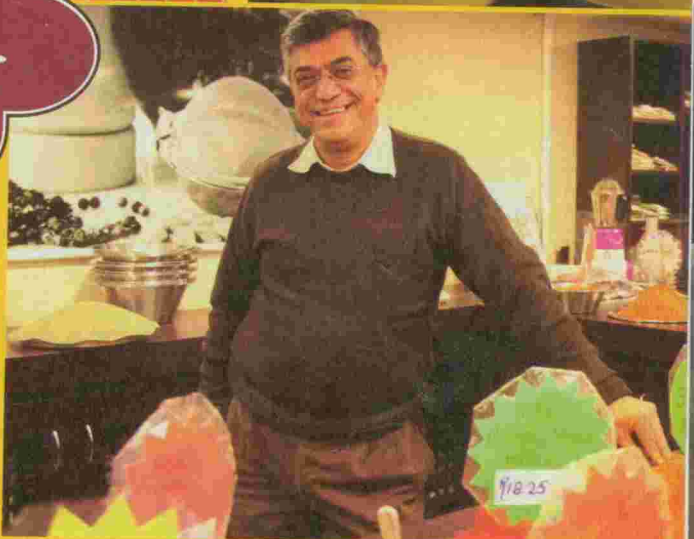
Harie, recently commissioned a complete overhaul of the premises. The result, designed by Durbanite Carmen Kelly, exceeds even his optimistic expectations.

A welcome sense of spaciousness prevails, with extra-wide aisles and goods arrayed in eye-catching combinations on streamlined, stained wooden shelves. The tinted concrete floors complement the ochres, terracotta and saffron of the curry powders heaped temptingly at the new Curry Bar, and vivid Sari fabric banners flutter from the ceiling above mountains of heaped dates, nuts and sweetmeats. Scents fight with one-another for prominence. The environment might have changed, but the thrill of the bazaar is undiminished.

From Labourers to Leaders
Over a cup of steaming Masala chai, Harie discusses the history of the Indian community in Durban, the genesis of the family business, and its evolution from a grocer's store to a full-blown emporium. Harie, a fourth generation Durbanite, is of

NOTHING, perhaps, is as quintessentially 'Durban' as the exotic blends of spices and curries that are a mandatory purchase by visitors to our city. Back in the dreary confines of their concrete jungles, enduring a Cape or Gauteng winter, they are drawn nostalgically to the grocery cupboard, where just a whiff of cardamom, turmeric or ginger transports them back to our golden beaches, and the energetic jostle of Warwick Triangle. In a swoon of pleasure recalled, they might well be thinking of the heart of the Indian culinary tradition, the inimitable Spice Emporium at 31 Pine Street. Lovely word, emporium. Derived from the Greek emporion, from emporos, or 'merchant,' it echoes the great Victorian houses of commerce, veritable Aladdin's caves of colourful, fragrant goods from far-flung places. The Spice Emporium maintains the grand old tradition of abundance and

variety, and provides reassuringly old-school levels of service. Whether you're after a few teaspoons of curry blend, or a massive 100kg cooking pot capable of feeding the masses, you are assured of personalised attention and excellent advice. Naturally, it's the rare shopper who will emerge with just the item that sent him or her into the store, but then that's part of the fun of the emporium experience. A cone of incense promising sweet thoughts and serenity, a bag of golden sev, studded with nuts, a bar of Mysore sandal soap - 'recommended in ancient ayurvedic texts for skin care,' tossed into your shopping basket with a little thrill of excitement at the promise of sampling the exotic bounty of the Orient. If it's been a while since your last visit to The Spice Emporium, you certainly are in for a couple of thrills, and more than a hint of exoticism. As part of his long-term strategy to transform the traditional Indian market concept into a thoroughly first-world shopping experience, genial CEO, Vinod



Gujarati Hindu descent, and a member of the well-known Haribai clan. While his business methods are highly progressive, he confesses that the traditions of 'the old country' still exert a strong sway.

"The kids and grandkids laugh at me when I watch Indian television, but what can I say - it's still part of who I am," he shrugs. In the next breath he talks excitedly about the strength of India as a world economy, and the growing ties between his ancestral home and Southern Africa.

"The I.B.S.A alliance is going to mean great things for the local economy," he predicts. "With 2010 on the horizon, we need all the help we can get. Particularly in the booming building industry, where we lack sufficient trained workers, we need to draw on highly skilled experts from India and elsewhere. There is currently a high level of skills transference, and imports between South Africa and India have risen by 80% in the past year."

It's a far cry from a century ago, and the irony isn't lost on Harie. "In 1860 Indians started arriving by ship to work as labourers in the cane fields of Natal. They were issued a five-year permit. In 1916 it was decided

to stem the flow, and an edict was passed forbidding the emigration of any more Indian citizens. There was no further trade between the two countries for 45 years. It was a very trying time for those who were separated from family members."

In the interim, of course, there was Gandhi, whose Satyagraha (peaceful resistance) campaign celebrates its centenary this year. "As former President Nelson Mandela famously remarked, 'They gave us Gandhi, and we sent back the Mahatma,'" says Hare.

In time the Indian community became a powerful force within the ANC, fighting for democracy alongside their oppressed black countrymen. Under apartheid legislation, both groups were restricted in terms of the areas where they might trade, and blocked from acquiring property in the more sought-after areas of the CBD.

"To secure premises in the better areas - like our current building in Pine Street - we were forced to operate through a European middleman, who fronted the property transaction, and just hold thumbs that he would honour the terms of the agreement," Harie explains.

"The Spice Emporium started out seventy-

odd years ago as a wholesaler, K. Haribai & Sons, in the Kasbah area of Durban. In the old days we all bought our spices at the historic Indian Market - sadly razed in a fire some years back. The family business catered to a niche market originally. Despite the implementation of sanctions, we still got our supplies regularly. Merchants just had to be ingenious about the routes they used to import goods.

"In the 1980s we had to move from the CBD when our lease expired. It hit me then that our profile had to change with the times. The name was changed to re-position our image, and we opened in Pine Street in 1986. Trade was slow at first, as people discovered where we'd relocated to, and then we began to pick up the tourist trade. We started placing ads in papers as far away as Cape Town and Gauteng, hyping the shop up."

If You Can't Stand the Heat

"The Spice Emporium is now synonymous with quality, variety, space and fantastic service. It's a comfortable retail environment, with fixed prices. We do a lot of work educating the public on Indian culture and cuisine, and have started printing our recipes



SPICE IT UP



as giveaways, emphasising that Indian food isn't just about heat, but rather about flavour," Harie stresses.

We are standing at the Curry Bar, where the strikingly pretty 'Ranie G' – mistress of spices – demonstrates some of her original culinary masterpieces. "I provide advice on recipes and blends, and am constantly experimenting to create new taste sensations," she says. "I'm currently working on a Bird's Eye chilli mix for those who like a bit more heat, and I'm on a mission to create my own version of Nando's spice for a special customer."

Adjoining the Curry Bar is a well-stocked library of Oriental cookery books, where prospective buyers can take the weight off their feet, sit on an elegant velvet ottoman, and peruse the selection on offer. The Spice Emporium also stocks a comprehensive selection of books on holistic health practices and natural cures for everything from depression to back pain.

"The health benefits of many of our traditional flavourings have been common knowledge in India for centuries, but they are only now being discovered by Western practitioners," Harie explains. "Turmeric paste, for example, heals cuts and aids sore

throats. It is also excellent for promoting healthy digestion, and is an important ingredient in face creams."

Nice Chaat-ing With You

As part of his ongoing expansion plans, Harie has commissioned a rather special eatery for the store. It will be the first of its kind on the continent, and promises to prove a huge draw card with both local 'foodies' and foreign visitors.

The 'Chaat Bistro' will serve cuisine derived from roadside stalls in India. "Chaat means 'to lick,'" explains Harie's chief export partner, Dharmil Thacker, who is over on one of his regular visits from that continent, and is obviously a great Chaat enthusiast.

"Chaat is served on green leaves, without a spoon. You don't need one, because the food leaves your tongue tingling to the very last morsel, and you can't resist licking up the leftovers."

Chaat employs mint, tamarind, garlic chutney, potato, chillies, onions, puffed rice and sprouted mung beans, in various savoury combinations. The Bistro is scheduled to open by the end of the year.

The Spice Emporium is strictly vegetarian. None of the food it stocks contains meat

products, egg or gelatine, so vegetarians can shop with complete confidence. A wide range of Soya products is available.

Another innovative development at the store is the introduction of a high-end boutique stocking beautifully decorated temple statues and ceremonial paraphernalia, overlooking the main retail complex. Exquisite workmanship is offset by surprisingly reasonable price tags. Harie also has plans to introduce a gallery devoted to carefully selected contemporary Indian art – another first for the city.

"The Spice Emporium will offer an entire cultural experience on your doorstep," says the enthusiastic CEO. "We are located in the prime tourist 'golden triangle,' and our visitors range from South African Indians reconnecting with their culture, to Indian Indians who are nostalgic for home, and those who want an introduction to all things Indian. Whatever you need – from a pin to an elephant – if we don't stock it, we will source it." Mb

