

# Stars, Spice & Everything's Nice

A CONVERSATION WITH EXECUTIVE CHEF

# SRIJITH GOPINATHAN

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Nestled in the heart of San Francisco just steps away from Union Square, Campton Place Restaurant has earned double Michelin star status with Executive Chef Srijith Gopinathan. His deft fusion of Cal-Indian flavors and artistic plating continues to create memorable and multi-sensory dining experiences. However, what really stands out is how nice (and funny) he is. Chef Gopinathan's easy going manner and engaging smile are somewhat contrary to the customary image of a reserved Michelin-starred chef. He is the only Indian chef in the nation to receive such distinction. Sitting down over chai one afternoon, Chef Gopinathan shares with GEV what has contributed to his success, how technology plays a part in his kitchen, and how he is still trying to find balance in what he does.

#### BEYOND THE STARS

As Executive Chef at Campton Place since 2008, Chef Gopinathan received his second Michelin star in 2016 and one wonders what he has done differently with his approach to the menu. He believes things are largely the same and not much has changed. According to the chef, "Change is important but one more star or other accolade shouldn't change our approach; then it becomes artificial." Does he feel he

needs to do something different? Not necessarily different but he always feels he should do more and do better. He doesn't need to have a star. "It really starts with intention," he reflects.

Keeping a diverse menu and staying competitive, Chef Gopinathan works and collaborates with the back and front of the house. "I believe it's about getting feedback. It starts in the kitchen, from the cooks, my colleagues, myself, then the front of the house staff who actually see the reactions of the patrons and guests on a daily basis," he proclaims. "Feedback is important and I want to make sure it is taken into account. It's not about me always liking the food; it's about feeding people and the important thing is that people come to the restaurant and enjoy it. If they don't like the food, there's no point in serving it."

#### TECHNOLOGY IN THE KITCHEN

In Chef Gopinathan's world, his technology is both physical and sensory. Fragrant spices such as star anise, cinnamon, and cardamon are star ingredients in his kitchen. He loves using coriander seeds for savory creations and cardamon for desserts. When asked his favorite protein, he playfully responds that he loves milk but also adds, "I like chicken or a good





“ Chef Gopinathan is a huge thinker. You can see it in the presentation of his food. Not only that, he is the funniest and nicest chef I know.”

RICHARD DEAN,  
MASTER SOMMELIER  
CAMPTON PLACE



#### CHEF EN GLAM



flavorful bird like squab, and fish paired with simple and seasonal ingredients,” he shares. The team relies on a sous vide to cook protein to its perfect temperature while preserving essential flavor. The main benefit of sous vide is to ensure food is evenly cooked from edge to edge, to its desired doneness without overcooking the outside and maintaining moisture. Another tool he employs is a nitrogen-powered canister to create foams, fluffy sauces, and infusions. Chef Gopinathan knows technology is driving new world cuisine to the next level. He acknowledges that it’s easier to use technology to enhance what he’s already doing. “It can also be easy to lose sight of what you’re doing and over use high tech equipment,” Chef adds. “Really at the end of the day, what you’re really doing is still just food.”

#### TO STAY OR NOT TO STAY

Chef feels that having Campton Place located inside 5-star luxury hotel Taj Campton Place is symbiotic. “There are many guests who stay at the hotel to facilitate visits to the restaurant. Being in a hotel benefits the hotel and also benefits the restaurant.” He shares that it gives him a tremendous amount of satisfaction when guests plan their vacation around the meals they experience at Campton Place.

#### FINDING BALANCE

Chef Gopinathan admits he’s still trying to find a balance between work and home life with his wife and son. “As of now, I’m working more than being at home,” laughs Chef. “At home, I don’t cook a lot to the frustration of my wife. We have a small garden in the back yard; we make a lot of salads and our own

salad dressings. We also make sweets with our son.” A favorite local escape for Chef and his family is Monterey and another cherished spot is his home town of Trivandrum in southwestern India. He left in his early 20’s and feels he’s not lived there enough. He’s always drawn back to see what’s going on. “India is a very old country and there’s so much to learn and study. My parents are still there and I take my son every year to visit. He’s very close to his grandparents and connected to his roots.”

There are many family recipes he draws from but certain ones he doesn’t make in America because of the complexity of the dish or because some of them are an acquired taste. He remembers there was a time when Indian spices were foreign to America and now people are loving it. “There are more Americans who are asking it to be slightly spicier!”

Chef Gopinathan believes balance can be achieved by how much you show or do not show as a chef. “Chefs have the opportunity to get out and reveal who they are, what they are capable of and not be behind the screen most of the time. We are the artist and our canvas is the plate. When we know who’s the artist, the plate has more meaning. To me, that’s when proper balance is maintained.”

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# A CHEF'S GALLERY

“ We are the artist  
and our canvas  
is the plate.”

EXECUTIVE CHEF  
SRIJITH GOPINATHAN  
CAMPTON PLACE



TANDORI PEACH SALAD,  
MINT SNOW, CUCUMBER  
AND SPICED RAITA