

UTSAV

A BRIDGE IN THE SKY
SERVING THREE CUISINES
AND ONE CITY'S SPIRIT

BY JEREMY MURPHY

A Dining Room Above the City

In a city that loves a spectacle, Utsav offers one before you even open the menu. The dining room floats like a glassy corridor in the sky, a literal bridge between two buildings with windows framing midtown's churn of light and motion. "We are located on a skywalk between two buildings," owner Nandita Khanna says, still amused by the novelty after a quarter century. "I have not seen this anywhere else in the city... it overlooks the plaza, it has windows on both sides." The effect is a New York postcard come to life: foot traffic gliding below, Broadway a stroll away, Rockefeller Center just offstage.

From Buffet Beginnings to a Culinary Journey

Utsav – a word synonymous with "festival" in Sanskrit – has been part of this scene for 25 years, a woman-owned stalwart in the Theater District with an origin story that tracks both New York dining trends and Khanna's own culinary inheritance. "We were actually an all Indian menu," she says of the early years, when a generous lunch buffet drew office workers from the Avenue of the Americas towers. The pandemic ended that. "Nobody wanted a buffet and I was happy to get rid of it because I was never a big fan... it was just something we had to start with in 2000, it was effectively de rigueur in Indian restaurants, everybody had a buffet." The silver lining, she adds with a laugh: "Now they want it back and I'm not doing it."

Scrapping the steam tables cleared space – literal and creative – for a pivot that makes Utsav singular today. Khanna is from

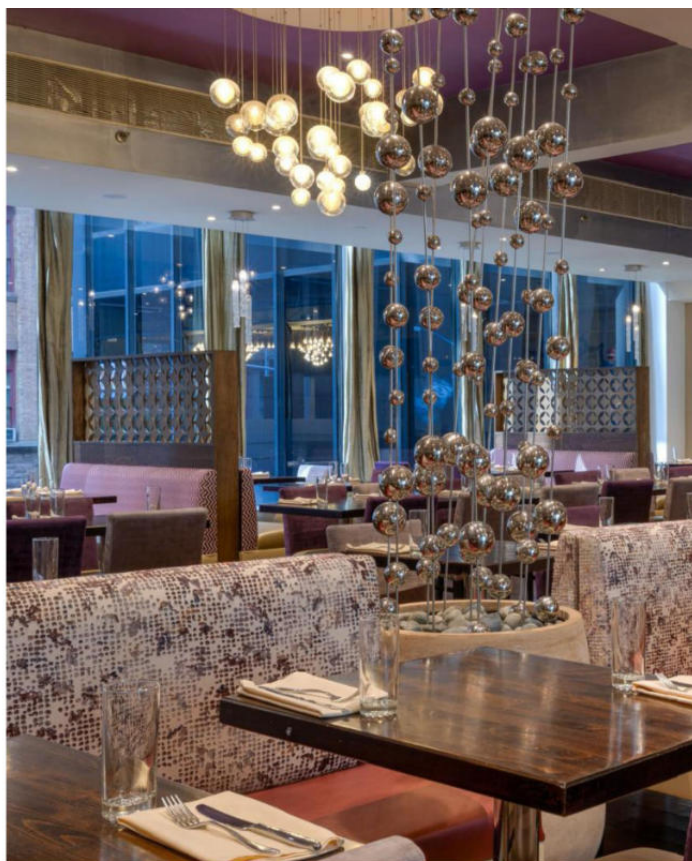
Kolkata (Calcutta), home to India's oldest Chinatown and the cradle of Indo-Chinese cooking. Her family's restaurant there, BAR-B-Q, has been open on Park Street for more than six decades, and its recipes now form a second through-line on Utsav's menu. "I said, let's get the recipes from my Indo-Chinese restaurant, my family restaurant back home," she recalls. "I have an Indo-Chinese kitchen, and I have an Indo-Chinese menu which is very popular."

Flavors from Kolkata and Beyond

Then came a third act: a compact but heartfelt Bengali menu, celebrating the food of Khanna's hometown. "In 2023 I decided to offer the cuisine of my hometown... the Bengali food," she says. It makes Utsav, she notes, an outlier. "We are offering three cuisines. I don't know if

there's any other Indian restaurant that offers three different menus... but we are the only ones in Manhattan that offer the Calcutta styled, Bengali menu."

The result is a dining room where patrons pre-theater can go classic or wander. There's a reassuring roster of North Indian standards – creamy chicken tikka masala, lush saag – alongside signatures you don't see everywhere. Khanna's eyes light up when she describes a snack she brought over from Kolkata: "The butter chicken kulcha... a mini stuffed bread... basically butter chicken stuffed into a mini bread." There's a vegetarian version too, "with cream cheese and truffle oil." The tandoor gets a few surprises: "We do a dish called the tandoori broccoli... which is not very common." Fans





of the grill will find the requisite lamb chops, and seafood lovers can zero in on a sea bass tikka that feels made for a glass of white wine and a curtain time.

From the Indo-Chinese side, the greatest hits arrive with speed and heat: "Chili chicken... always a favorite," Khanna says, plus chili-garlic noodles and salt-and-pepper prawns, dishes built for sharing and for the kind of lively table Utsav seems to attract before and after shows. If you drift to the Bengali column, the tone softens to comfort. Khanna's personal favorite is the rice-and-lentil porridge she calls homestyle and restorative. "That is something you can eat every day," she says. "Don't eat restaurant food every day, but I love that because that is like homestyle cooking."

A Theater District Favorite with Staying Power

The space itself is designed to hold multitudes. "It's two levels," Khanna says. "There's a bar on the first floor, outdoor dining available in summer, and then upstairs you have a large dining room that seats close to 200." There's also a private room for roughly 25, and the main room can be partitioned "with a soundproof partition" to create a smaller salon for about 70 to 80 guests. Full buyouts happen, too – 150 seated or 200 standing – making that bridge-in-the-sky double as an events hall with a Midtown panorama.

Location remains one of Utsav's superpowers. "It's good for theatre. It's good for tourism as well as a robust office clientele. Everything is around there,"



Khanna says, summing up the nightly cadence of pre-show toasts and post-show debriefs. The bar's list leans bright and aromatic – ginger, saffron, mango, chiles – flavors that dovetail naturally with the kitchen's spice palette and feel right for a restaurant that threads Indian classics, Indo-Chinese comfort, and Bengali nuance.

If the menu now reads like a travelogue, it's because Khanna has always cooked with a map in mind. She comes from a restaurant family with footprints in Kolkata and Tokyo. "We have restaurants back home in Calcutta and my family also opened restaurants in Japan," she says. What began as an investment became a life, and the restaurant has matured in the same way New York institutions do – by evolving without losing the thing that made them beloved.

Asked what Utsav does better than anyone, Khanna resists the sales pitch. Longevity, she implies, is its own credential, and the promise is in the breadth. "We've been around and we... are offering three cuisines," she says. Her pride shows most plainly when she talks about the Bengali offerings – still rare in Manhattan, still the taste of home. That, and the view. After all, how many rooms in New York let you eat butter-chicken-stuffed kulcha while suspended over the Avenue of the Americas? In a city built on bridges, Utsav may be the only restaurant that literally is one. **P**

utsavny.com