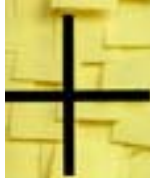
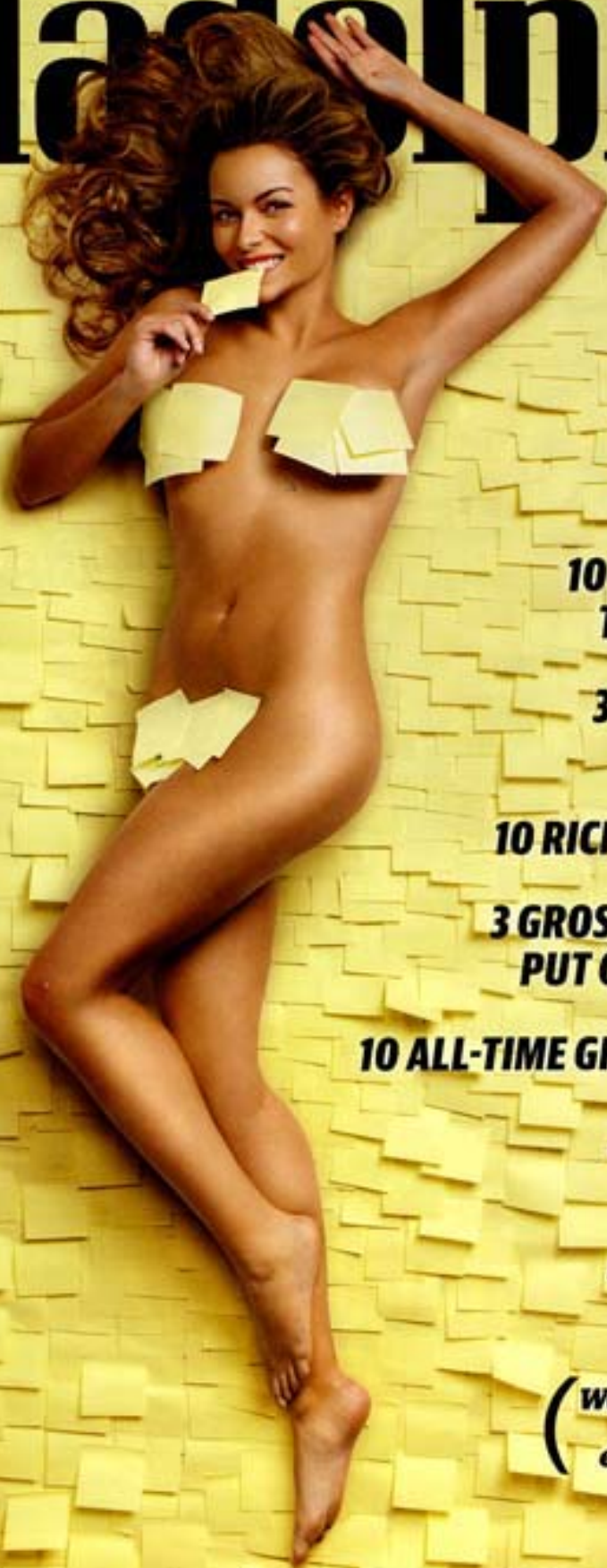


THE LIST ISSUE

# Philadelphia



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*(We could go on and on.  
And inside, that's  
exactly what we do.)*

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# Spice Route

At Tashan, the kitchen charts a course between India and France. **By Trey Popp**

**It may take 20 minutes or 20 seconds.** It may come out as a gasp of excitement or a groan of discontent. But eventually, every newcomer to Tashan utters the same exclamation. For some, the reaction is triggered by a pair of double-cut lamb chops, fragrant with ripe papaya and honey. For others, it's the second bite of a tawa-seared spinach patty—the one where the pincer-pistachio filling begins to mingle with the heady perfume of morels in saffron cream. Or maybe it's not even the food that does it. But somewhere between the five-trunked Ganesha statue guarding the entry and the floor-to-ceiling wall of wine, the words just come tumbling out: *This is not Tiffin.* Nothing about Mumukshu Narula's rightly beloved Indian delivery chain will prepare you for his risky bet on post-curry Indian cuisine.

Three tile-inlaid tandoors dominate the view into chef Sylva Senat's open kitchen, but Tashan isn't your father's yellow-walled, idol-crammed Indian joint, either. From the ebony-stained floor planks to a surreally dark (and unisex) bathroom whose beaded black walls glisten as faintly as midnight rain, Tashan's interiors channel meta-modernism through the color palette of Christopher Nolan's Gotham. A dark brown stone bar anchors a lounge filled with plush Scandinavian-style chairs and Indian coffee tables with carved wooden tops. Low-slung couches and towering Indian wall screens are upholstered in black leather. The dining room banquettes

are as deep and dark as a panther's lair.

Narula's choice of kitchen chief further breaks the mold. After scouting London and New York for Indian chefs, he decided what he *actually* wanted was an outsider. He found one in Senat, a Haitian-born American whose seminal training came during six years in New York working under Jean-Georges Vongerichten, mostly at his Trump Tower flagship.

Senat tapped into consultant Sanjay Shende's 22 years of experience running kitchens in New Delhi and London to create a shared-plate menu that elevates the Indian pantry with French presentation, using techniques that straddle both borders. It draws inspiration from all over India, going past the usual South-North divide to embrace regions as remote as Nagaland, with its Southeast Asian influences, and the Nicobar Islands, as in an octopus dish paying homage to that archipelago.

Senat braises his octopus with a mirepoix whose spicing runs from star anise and cinnamon to lemongrass and bonito, fire-roasts it on a *sigrí* (akin to an Indian barbecue), then serves it with a Spanish-style roasted red pepper sauce drawn gently back toward the Bay of Bengal with popped mustard seeds and red curry paste.

Breathe.

You can call it fusion if you want. Just don't call it dumb. This globally inflected Indian food is a potential minefield, but Senat dances through it without dropping much more than a teaspoon's worth of his 51-spice arsenal.

The tandoor work here ranges in effect from sublime surprises (large prawns, nutty with fenugreek and toasted yellow pea flour, kept moist in the clay oven by cream cheese) to near miscarriages—like those lamb chops, whose rib bones had turned to brittle shreds of carbon. How had the meat stayed so succulent? It's a question I wouldn't mind pondering at Tashan's bar five nights a week.

Tid tire of the overpriced sweet-tooth cocktails, but the 80-bottle wine list is ripe for exploration. Still, food is what I'd be after—like those fennel-scented scallops with the strangely funky South Indian molle sauce fished out of Narula's childhood memories and brightened with green-tomato jam. Or

## Tashan

777 South Broad Street,  
267-667-2170, mytashan.com

★★★

Cuisine: Modern Indian  
Share-plate prices: \$7 to \$35



Gourmet cheese tiffin

sliced pork tenderloins with fiery Goan xacuti, and a pomme soufflé puffed up just like deep-fried puri bread—a stealth connection between French and Indian starch cookery that goes back as far as the 1800s.

And speaking of which, no one should ever eat at Tashan's bar without tossing a few crispy gol gappas into his mouth. Each bite triggers an explosion of chutneys and mint-cilantro water.

Tashan has been slow out of the gate in some respects. My first meal here—dogged by overeager, anxiously intrusive service—progressed like honey flowing uphill. But swifter pacing led to a superior second visit, and now Narula has introduced palate-cleansing sorbets between courses to keep the rhythm from flagging. Perhaps they'll also jog his lunch-delivery loyalists out of their narrowly comparative mind-set.

"Forget about Tiffin for just one hour while you're here," he pleads with people. "Just come with an open mind."

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Gol gappas: dumplings with spicy potato and mint-cilantro water



Antipasti



## THE HARD SELL

Sometimes it can be tough to make a simple pasta seem appealing, but Zeppoli makes it easy.

**In an era when chefs face off on television** to see who can make a meal featuring string cheese, jicama and gingersnaps in each of three courses, interrupting the watercooler recap with a plug for straight-ahead Italian food can brand you with the foodie equivalent of the mark of Cain. Even leaving kitsch and *Chopped* aside, these are heady days for restaurant-goers. From ham-flavored foam to edible gin paper, there are just so many new things to try that praising a simple bowl of pasta can seem like shouting into the whirlwind.

Which is why I broach the subject of Joey Baldino's cooking at Zeppoli with a certain dread. The South Philly native has gone to Collingswood with a menu of dishes a thousand cooks have cooked a million times before: Tagliatelle with lemon and bottarga. Spinach-and-ricotta gnocchi in brown butter. Fennel sausage with broccoli rabe. And his renditions of these classics, though by no means austere, are neither deconstructed nor molecularly manipulated nor anything else besides what they've always been.

There is a difference here, though, and it's the only one that matters: Baldino does them better than 999 of those other cooks.

Well, maybe 998. The 33-year-old's last job was as chef de cuisine at Vetri, where the boss isn't exactly an also-ran. But whatever the case, Zeppoli—whose aims are as simple as its white lace curtains and distressed wood tables—is executing on a level matched by few restaurants on either side of the Walt Whitman.

Those silken tangles of tagliatelle, for example, conjure fantasies of an orchard at the edge of a fishermen's colony—the lemon zest and juice melding with the cured roe's briny umami wallop, melding in turn with sparingly buttered starches that shine with citrus but cloak its acidity. A late-summer panzanella was textbook but transporting: offering superior tomatoes, oversize croutons derived from house-made bread, and white anchovy fillets both mellow and pure. Baldino's whole fishes—bronzino one night, orata on a luckier one—were as flawless as the grilled zucchini and artichoke hearts astride them; his Sicilian stew was a dark melody of shellfish stock and saffron, shrimp and crisp-edged swordfish.

From the sweet-and-sour carrots on the antipasti plate to a cool-but-not-chilly almond-milk biancomangiare for dessert, the seasoning here was always in balance, the temperatures just right. And then, with the modest bill, came sticky struffoli—honeyed pebbles with no balance, no subtlety. So the meal ended with a reminder: While every other dish likewise risked banality, each transcended it instead. —T.P.

### WEB EXCLUSIVE:

Trey Popp pays a holiday visit to **Vetri** in this month's Revisit at [Phillymag.com](http://Phillymag.com).

## Zeppoli

618 Collings Avenue,  
Collingswood, 856-854-2670,  
[zeppolirestaurant.com](http://zeppolirestaurant.com)

★★★

Cuisine: Sicilian/Italian  
Entrée prices: \$15 to \$29