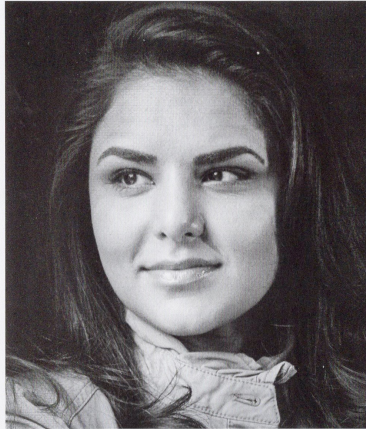


From “Bright Lights of the Second City: 50 Prominent Chicagoans on Living with Passion and Purpose”



Alpana Singh

Master Sommelier

Her palate, tenacity, and culinary acumen uncork a talent of rare vintage.

More than a decade ago at this writing, at age twenty-six, Alpana Singh became the youngest woman to join the ranks of the Court of Master Sommeliers,* the elite body that administers the intensive, days-long exam that aspiring sommeliers must pass to earn the coveted Master Sommelier credential. Four years earlier, Alpana Singh displayed her trademark self-confidence when she relocated from her family's California home to Chicago after unexpectedly landing the plum position of sommelier at Chicago's Everest Restaurant, located on the 40th floor of the Chicago Stock Exchange.

Her book, *Alpana Pours: About Being a Woman, Loving Wine & Having Great Relationships*, welcomes readers into the flavorful world of wine by making the subject what she reminds us it should be – fun! Formerly, she was the Director of Wine and Spirits for Lettuce Entertain You Enterprises and host of the Emmy Award-winning TV program “Check, Please!” In 2012, with partners, she opened The Boarding House, a Chicago fine-dining establishment.

Until 1975, my parents lived in Fiji, as did many Indian emigrants. They moved to Monterey, California – where a large contingent of Fijian Indians also resided – a year before my birth. As the first members of both of their families to resettle in a new country, there was a strong obligation to foster other newcomers. In that role, my mother became an outgoing pillar of the community. During the twenty-three years I lived at home, some twenty different people lived with us. While our life was sociable and boisterous, it also was tumultuous. You had to speak loudly to be heard. I liked the feeling of belonging to an extended community, but the challenge was that young people are considered a strong reflection of their parents in Indian families. When I moved to Chicago at twenty-three, I was eager to begin an independent life.

As a teenager, I often was stubborn and defiant, never taking “no” for an answer. Like many Indian parents, my parents expected me to go to college. At eighteen, I needed money for my education and applied at a fine-dining restaurant in Monterey, Montrieo Bistro. I was not hired initially because I knew nothing about wine. I really needed the job so I spent the entire next weekend reading *Wine for Dummies* and, as a result, was then offered the position immediately. That's how I

problem solve – decide what I need to accomplish, step by step, and complete the next task that will help accomplish my goal. Rather than accept “no,” I drill down and – when necessary – figure out if I can change someone's mind.

As it turned out, college bored me out of my mind but I became increasingly fascinated with wine. I experienced an awakening: Maybe I could become a sommelier. The manager at Montrieo encouraged me and recommended I seek a job at a wine shop. [Note: She even offered to work for free.] Essentially, the decision had been made. And once I decide something, it's done. Considerable contention arose when I told my mother I was quitting college and instead would work in a wine shop while continuing as a restaurant server. In Hinduism, the deity Brahma is devoted to education and higher learning. Education and religion are completely intertwined. In my mother's mind, I worked at a liquor store and served drinks; in my mind I was training to become a sommelier.

Jean Joho, chef/proprietor of Chicago's Everest restaurant, one of the country's premier dining rooms, took a chance by hiring me as his sommelier at the young age of twenty-three. I was a wild stallion of unbridled energy in need of mentoring, shaping, toning. My dress and accessories – including colorful plastic jewelry and service etiquette – were sometimes inappropriate. He taught me how to present myself. Luck intervened, too. I happened to meet Chef Joho, coincidentally, only minutes after Claudine Pépin of PBS shared a glowing endorsement of me with a mutual friend because I'd passed the advanced sommelier examination at age twenty-one. That individual then shared the story with Chef Joho, who offered me a job that very day.

Talented sommeliers must be passionate about history, sociology, travel, culture, art, food, and science. We are individuals with diverse interests that just happen to culminate in a neat little package called wine.

Alpana Singh was interviewed at a coffee shop in the Streeterville neighborhood on May 23, 2012. Her birthday is November 29, 1976.

Favorites

BOOK

One Hundred Years of Solitude by Gabriel García Márquez. The final twenty pages of the book were the reward for the three years it took me to read it.

NONPROFIT

Trio Animal Foundation, Chicago. The organization assists shelters, rescues, and individuals by paying the medical bills of homeless pets. I grew up with a menagerie of dogs, cats, chickens – and even a duck.

PERFORMER

Madonna. I love how she continues reinventing herself.

QUOTATION

“Everyone brings wine. I bring bread.”

– LARRY DAVID, AMERICAN ACTOR, WRITER, COMEDIAN, AND TELEVISION PRODUCER

* Sommeliers are responsible for wine and beverage selection at an establishment, including maintenance of the list, service, and the training required to help create environments in which guests can savor complementary food and wine pairings. The Court of Master Sommeliers was established to encourage and improve the standards of beverage knowledge and service in hotels and restaurants. As of February 2014, 135 professionals had earned the title of Master Sommelier in North America. Of that number, 116 were men and nineteen were women. There are 214 professional sommeliers worldwide who have received the title of Master Sommelier since the first Master Sommelier Diploma Exam.

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