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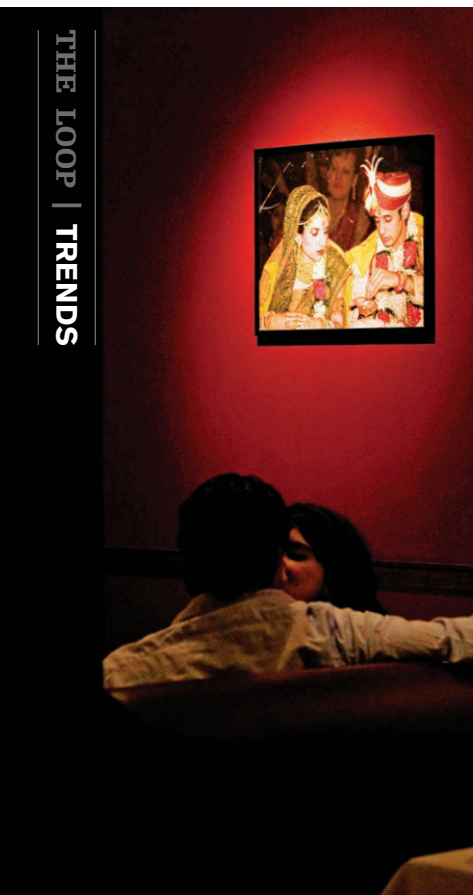
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# Indian Summer

**SAY YOU'RE SARI**  
Clockwise from top: Cozying up at Kiran's, MFA's 'The Siege of Mathura' by Jarasandha, Balenciaga style, the Mehtas, and 'Shiva Nataraja' at MFA.



**A sub-continental explosion of art, food, film and high fashion is heating up in Houston this fall!**

| By Peter Barnes | Photography by Shannon O'Hara |

India is a chorus sung in 844 dialects, an overwhelming composition of gold-clad temples, 10-cent street chai and gleaming glass office towers built atop 45 centuries of history. A bit like a maharaja's opulent manor, the sub-continent houses a treasure trove of vibrant cultures. And now Houston—in a hot fall trend that touches food, fashion, film and fine art—is throwing open the palace door.

For starters, a new permanent exhibit at the **Museum of Fine Arts** showcases Indian art from the Himalayas to Bombay, the latest of the museum's **Arts of Asia** galleries that eventually will encircle the main exhibition hall. A 6th-century Jain religious carving of glittering sandstone shares space with intricate gold-inlaid Mughal-era watercolors, contemporary works and interactive animation of Hindu deities designed for children by a Pixar animator.

"Once upon a time there was a very small Indian community here," says Indian-born Pershant Mehta, a longtime Houston entrepreneur and developer of such cosmetics smashes as the popular new Luminess airbrush line. "And what I'm excited about is over the years, I've seen this community blossom."

True enough, in the last few years Mehta's community pulled

together to help the MFA assemble more than 100 objects and give them a permanent home, thanks in no small part to a \$500,000 donation from Mehta and his wife, Nidhika, that prompted the museum to name the exhibit in their honor. As the always elegantly attired philanthropists-about-town put it, they wanted not just to show their own children the riches of their Indian heritage, but also to share it with their globally connected hometown.

The exhibit isn't the only bit of sub-continental culture generating buzz. Local fashionistas have noted that, at Paris Fashion Week, Indian-inspired styles were on prominent display. **Balenciaga** designer Nicolas Ghesquière used sari silhouettes in his fall collection, modern twists on the traditional Indian-style draping. And in New York, **Ports 1961** star Tia Cibani's fall line nods to her Indian heritage with more sari shapes—and colors like henna red. And while it's nothing new that the runway often takes inspiration from global cultures, Pershant Mehta notes a particular connection between the U.S. and his home country. "There's a real flirting between these two cultures entertainment-wise," he says.

In fact, it's hard to hold a conversation about India in America these days without someone bringing up Oscar-nabbing movie *Slumdog Millionaire*. Now a broader take on the sub-continent's film scene is hitting Houston, as Indian film producers and enthusiasts steel to introduce the city to a staggering range of Indian cinema—well beyond typical Western portrayals and flashy Bollywood musicals.

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...CONTINUED Sutapa Ghosh, the film producer and businesswoman behind this month's first **Indian Film Festival of Houston** (see Calendar Top Ten for details) says there's an amazing range of styles. (While the U.S. produces about 600 films annually, India's billion inhabitants devour 800 titles each year—and only 200 of those are in Hindi, the language of world-famous Bollywood.) "I don't think the Western world is exposed to that," says Ghosh. Over six days, the festival will air shorts, documentaries and features from across a broad cultural mélange. The international premiere of Deepti Naval's quirky love story *Two Paisas for Sunshine, Four Annas for Rain* is a highlight.

After finishing college in the U.S., Calcutta-born Ghosh produced her first film at 25, which promptly won the Indian equivalent of an Academy Award. **Cinemawalla**, her Houston-based company, continues to produce movies, in addition to managing an Argentine vineyard and a steel-importing business. Somewhere between visiting the company's far-flung offices and piloting her private jet, Ghosh realized Houston's burgeoning interest in Indian culture made it ripe for a film festival. "It was in my mind for the last seven years," she says. "I was just looking for the right opportunity and time."

From the red carpet to the green grass of the Miller Outdoor Theatre, interest in Indian performance art flourishes. The high-energy music and dance of the local Samskriti Society for Indian Performing Arts' **"Bollywood Blast"** will rattle the Miller stage like a Kolkata train platform at rush hour Sept. 6. Meanwhile, the **Indian Culture Center** is planning a **Diwali** celebration for Oct. 24 in Jones Plaza Downtown. Celebrated by Hindus, Buddhists, Sikhs and Jains alike, this festival of lights delights all comers with music, dance and, maybe most of all, food.

Indeed, fall finds the city's love of Indian cuisine at an apex. In top restaurants, the genre has tilted up-market in recent years



**CINEMASALA!**  
A starving artist bonds with a prostitute's disabled son in the world premiere of 'Two Paisas for Sunshine, Four Annas for Rain' at the inaugural Indian Film Festival of Houston this month. Far above, clockwise from left: Kiran's chef-owner Kiran Varma in her busy kitchen, Varma's venison chops with ginger and mixed-berry chutney, a peek inside the Westheimer Curve's popular Indika, and a bartender at Kiran's shakes things up.

after having been dominated by cheap buffets competing with middle-brow Chinese dives. "Internet and travel have made people less fearful of the unknown," says Ravi Jaisinghani, co-owner of sleek **Indika** (516 Westheimer Rd., 713.524.2170). Inside the mod digs, growing throngs of foodies savor the evolving menu's authentic and diverse flavors, from the jumbo shrimp curry to less traditional grilled venison chops in port wine curry with cinnamon and cloves.

Meanwhile, chef-owner Kiran Verma of **Kiran's** (4100 Westheimer Rd., 713.960.8472) has earned a reputation as the godmother of Indian fine dining. She's credited with, among other innovations, having the first Indian restaurant in town with a wine list—now it's 400 labels strong. As a chef, she gilds her foundation in Mughlia-style regional cuisine with French nuance and organic-minded quality. "I wanted very upscale, very fresh," says Verma, as a staff member behind her irons the creases from the linen tablecloths in the dining room. Red woodwork and antique polo gear evoke the air of a colonial manse.

In the kitchen, one cook devotes his shift solely to making samosas to keep up with demand, while a handpicked blend of teas from across India steep in creamy chai. *Sikandari raan* leg of lamb is marinating in exotic spices, a full day before it will spend six hours in the oven and then slip off the bone onto some lucky person's plate.

The demand for Indian flavors has even reached into non-Indian eateries. At the Brit-themed **Red Lion Pub** (2316 S. Shepherd Dr., 713.782.3030), the chicken *tikka masala* is now the menu's best-seller. "It used to be fish and chips," says owner Craig Mallinson. The dish is so popular that when the Food Network's *Diners, Drive-Ins and Dives* breezed through recently, it filmed a segment on the dish (also popular in England), which uses yogurt as a key ingredient.

Like curry-craving Londoners did years ago, Houstonians are falling hard for the flavors, sights and sounds of a beguiling faraway world that suddenly isn't so far after all. "India's here," says Pershant Mehta, excited about the bright and bustling cultural season at hand. "It's all around us." ■