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GTA

One of Toronto's oldest vegetarian restaurants to close its doors after 50 years

This South Indian spot introduced generations of diners to vegetarian dosas and dhal.

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Shivaram Trichur, right, and his wife Devavira Trichur, have been operating Annapurna since July 1974.

Andrew Francis Wallace Toronto Star



By **Karon Liu** Food Reporter

Shivaram Trichur proudly shows off the original menu for his restaurant. It's handwritten and from the 1970s, with Annapurna scrawled across the top.

He also has a file folder of old newspaper clippings including a review from the Star, dated Oct. 4, 1975, written by the late entertainment journalist Sid Adilman in his Underground Gourmet dining column.

Lamenting the closure of The Eutheria, a vegetarian cafeteria at the now-defunct Rochdale College — an experimental housing and educational co-op on Bloor Street West — Adilman writes glowingly of a \$1.25 masala dosa stuffed with spicy potatoes and onions with a side of coconut chutney; four for \$1 bondas served with coconut chutney; and a 70-cent glass of “banana tiger’s milk” made with bananas, yogurt, carob, cinnamon and nutritional yeast.

After that was published, Shivaram says, the restaurant was finally on the map.

It was a time when there were few vegetarian restaurants in the city, but Annapurna was a name that frequently popped up. Located in the northwestern edge of the Annex, this predominantly South Indian spot introduced generations of diners to vegetarian dosas and dhal. It is one of the city’s longest-running vegetarian restaurants.

Now, 50 years after opening in July 1974, Annapurna will be closing its doors for good in early August (the exact date is undecided).



Devavira Trichur in the kitchen at Annapurna. After five decades in business, the menu still leans heavily on South Indian cooking with dosas, bondas and tiger's milk, which is made with bananas, yogurt, carob, cinnamon and nutritional yeast.

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Unlike many of the other closures in the city, this wasn't brought on by unaffordable rent, food inflation or the building being replaced by a luxury condo tower.

"My customers asked if they could give us financial support," says Shivaram, sitting in his restaurant on a recent weekday morning. "But it's not about that."

"I'm a little wonderstruck, or maybe I should say lucky or blessed to have a team of dedicated people at Annapurna," added Shivaram. "We have people who have a connection with food and are able to cook something that people say is excellent and ask for more. That gives me immense satisfaction."

The Trichurs had no prior restaurant experience before opening Annapurna. Devavira worked as a secretary, while Shivaram was a computer programmer pursuing a business and administration degree at Brock University, with plans to go into law.

“But I had a spiritual attraction to see the purpose of life. I was never inclined to accumulate (wealth) or become a business magnate,” he says.

The two became students of Sri Chinmoy, an [athletic spiritual leader](#) who ran a meditation centre in New York and was known for using athletics and art to spread his message of world peace.



Co-owner Shivaram Trichur of Annapurna has a file folder of old newspaper clippings about the restaurant, including a review from the Star, dated Oct. 4, 1975, that Shivaram says put his restaurant on the map.

Andrew Francis Wallace Toronto Star

In 1973, while attending one of Chinmoy's workshops in New York, Shivaram cooked for the leader and fellow students. Chinmoy suggested that Shivaram start a restaurant — something other followers of the leader did in New York, San Diego and San Francisco.

The following summer, Annapurna opened in the basement at the rear of an apartment building just north of Avenue and Davenport roads.

“It was an unrecognizable location ... people couldn’t find us but there was still a core of dedicated vegetarians who came regularly, some of whom still come here,” says Shivaram of the original 32-seat restaurant. “The rent was reasonable and I thought if I could stay in business for six months, I could keep going.”

In 1984, Annapurna relocated to its current spot at Bathurst and Dupont streets, inside what was formerly a spacious Indian and Pakistani restaurant with high ceilings and a kitchen as large as entire storefronts in Parkdale.

Decades later, Annapurna’s menu still leans heavily on South Indian cooking with the dosas, bondas and tiger’s milk still available all these years later, though the combined cost has risen to \$21 from \$3.

There’s also a “vegetable macro plate,” which includes brown rice, steamed vegetables and ginger-marinated tofu with nori and sesame seeds. The macrobiotic diet, which stems from Zen Buddhism and emphasizes eating vegetables, legumes and whole grains, was popular when the restaurant first opened. Other menu items include a tofu burger and a variety of salads.

The restaurant features a display table with some items for sale: books on spiritual enlightenment — some authored by Chinmoy — greeting cards and jars of local honey. Next to it is a mural of Annapurna, the Hindu goddess of food and nourishment. The website states that the restaurant is “dedicated to the oneness-world vision of Sri Chinmoy” and the menu features a short blurb about him on the back.



Shivaram Trichur, 90, poses at his restaurant by a mural of Annapurna, the Hindu goddess of food and nourishment, and the restaurant's namesake.

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In the 1970s, the restaurant was an early adopter of implementing a no-smoking policy. Writing about the possibility of a smoking ban in restaurants in the March 26, 1977 edition of the Star, writer (and admitted former smoker) Judylaine Fine listed places around the city that already adopted a no-smoking rule — the city itself didn't ban smoking in restaurants until 1997 — such as Annapurna and the since-closed Mexican-style vegetarian restaurant The Spice of Life.

“In fact, more restaurants in town with space for non-smokers are vegetarian than not,” Fine observed.

Today what sets Annapurna apart from other restaurants is that the use of cellphones and laptops is discouraged, though Shivaram says over the years students have used the restaurant as a study space.

One regular customer, a retired teacher who declined to give her name, said she used to do her marking at the restaurant while sipping chai. “You’re not going to get rushed out,” she says. “It just feels comfortable.”



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