



*It's not all
glitz & glamour*

Marisa D'Vari reveals the hectic schedule of Alpana Singh, Master Sommelier and owner of a trendy Chicago restaurant, The Boarding House



The bar with its chandelier of 9,000 wine glasses at The Boarding House restaurant. Inset: Alpana Singh, master sommelier, restaurateur and TV show host

All Indian-American parents are determined that their children will become doctors,” says Master Sommelier Alpana Singh with a laugh, recalling the moment she broke the news she wanted to spend her life in the wine world. Today Alpana is the proprietor of the upscale Boarding House restaurant in Chicago, a glamorous place with an international flair and jet-set ambience complete with a chandelier of 9,000 wine glasses over the first floor bar.

On the surface, Alpana leads a glamorous life yet it is a life rooted in a hard, disciplined routine. Born and raised in Monterey, California, she worked in her family’s ethnic grocery store at an early age. While waiting tables during her college years, she had her first sip of the 1990 Charles Melton Nine Popes from the Barossa Valley in Australia. It struck her like a lightning bolt, and Alpana knew she wanted to devote the rest of her life to wine.

The journey was not easy. But when she reached the Advanced Level from the Court of Master Sommeliers, she was hired by the posh Everest Restaurant in Chicago. After three years of serving expensive wines to wealthy clients by night and studying hard for the Master Sommelier examinations during the day, she finally achieved that designation at the age of 26 – the youngest woman to do so in the Court of Master Sommelier history.

Being a young, female sommelier at one of the best restaurants in America has its benefits – Alpana quickly became a media sensation, going on to serve as the host of the Emmy Award-winning restaurant review television show, *Check Please!* a PBS show airing weekly in Chicago, as well as appearing on *The Today Show*, *Food Network’s Iron Chef America*, and in numerous publications including *Newsweek*, *Food & Wine*, *Wine Spectator*, *Bon Appetit*, and *The New York Times*, not forgetting an early issue of *Sommelier India*.

It’s easy to think that an attractive, accomplished media star with her own restaurant could rest on her laurels – especially now that she has a restaurant of her own to generate income but that’s not Alpana’s style. Her day begins early – she often awakens on the couch where she sometimes collapses after working a very late shift. Bleary eyed, the first thing she does is reach for her iPhone to check emails, texts, and daily reports from the previous night.

“Mornings are slow,” she admits, saying that it takes her a long time to wash her hair, dress, and meditate with her dogs. “My make-up is driven by my lack of sleep,” she reveals, saying her favorite products are MAC to hide the dark circles under her eyes and NARS blush to make her look lively.

Alpana’s husband – a writer – drives her to work, where



The dining room at
The Boarding House

she continues to check emails, blog, place orders, and make menu changes. By 3 pm, the staff begins to enter the building and get ready for service. The staff “family meal” before service is Alpana’s favourite part of the day as they bask in the camaraderie of working with each another. “It’s the last moment before the doors open when we are still being ourselves, rather than a server for the customer.” During that time, she likes to take a personal interest in what her employees are doing and what is going on in their lives.

The 30 minutes before the doors open are the most hectic of the whole day, as dinner can end anywhere between midnight and 3 am. During that time she plays a variety of roles – hostess as well as sommelier – and is constantly on disaster management, as in the restaurant world something is always going wrong yet the guests must never become aware of it. She jokes with the staff that the restaurant should create its own reality show. At the end of the night, Alpana likes to wind down with a wine with high acidity like a Riesling or Sauvignon Blanc such as a 2011 Balthasar Rees Riesling from Germany or a 2011 FX Barc Complices de Loire Sauvignon Blanc. On the subject of her busy schedule and its effect on her marriage, Alpana admits that restaurant life can be tough on a relationship. Yet she and her husband try to spend time together; when they dine they enjoy simple foods.

As an Indian sommelier with stellar credentials, She must have faced her share of challenges. But Alpana claims she has never faced any discrimination. Although after a few moments, she reveals that once, during a job interview, the manager asked her what she would do if a man with a foreign accent said he did not want to be served by a female. A bit startled by the question, Alpana responded that if such a scenario were to occur, she would simply honor his wishes and arrange for him to be served by a male. “It’s not my job to change someone’s lifetime cultural expectations,” she explained.

When asked about the most exciting experience of her life, Alpana readily recalls the moment she went to a restaurant supply store. The eyes of the male clerk, about 21, lit up as soon as he saw Alpana. “I grew up with you!” he exclaimed, explaining that he got hooked on food and wine as a kid watching her TV shows in Chicago. At first, Alpana was shocked – here was a grown man saying he grew up with her. But then she began to do the math in her head, and realised that since she’d been doing the show for ten years he must have been about eleven at the time so he really did grow up watching her. “I felt really honoured – he looked up to me like another generation might have remembered growing up watching Julia Child on TV.”

Alpana named her restaurant for the boarding house it had been in the past. The physical building was built in



Alpana Singh: successful business woman

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1872 shortly after the Great Chicago Fire. Chicago Museum records revealed that the original owner of the building, Christian Kotz, operated a dry goods store on the first floor and rented the upstairs to boarders. In subsequent decades, the first floor was also a cheese company, saloon, tobacconist’s shop, beer pub, and even a laboratory. In 1988, Jerry Kleiner and architect Jordan Mozer transformed the entire building into a trendy nightclub. A series of such nightclubs followed, so turning the space into a restaurant for the first time was a major design and architectural undertaking.

The name also reflects Alpana’s belief that restaurants have become modern-day boarding houses: patrons gather to socialise and enjoy a shared meal. “The old boarding houses of the 19th and early 20th centuries conveyed hospitality and fostered camaraderie. They were the precursors of the restaurants we know today.”

The Boarding House features 450 wines from around the world available at a range of price points, including Sandhi, the wine from Raj Parr, Wine Director for the Mina Group. The wine-by-the-glass programme includes 20 selections – eight whites, two sparklings, and 10 reds. A successful businesswoman, Alpana is a splendid example of how far dedication as well as passion can take one, and credits her hardworking parents for instilling these values in her.