

Catch 23



The latest hotspot in Morristown is actually three hotspots: Ming II, Mendhi and SM23. Together they are the centerpiece in a downtown with plenty of new answers to the question, where should we meet for dinner and drinks? ►



ON THE MENU Ming II's menu features modern interpretations of classic dishes from the Far East.

BY JOEL KELLER
Photos by Gregory Pallante

Shaun Mehtani has an intimate relationship with the number 23. For instance, he turned 23 on Feb. 23. That's also the day when his vision of a new Morristown dining experience opened at the Hyatt Morristown at Headquarters Plaza.

In place of his family's signature Indian restaurant, Moghul, he has opened Ming II, Mendhi and SM23, a trio he hopes will become "destinations" for people who want to enjoy a great meal or a well-concocted cocktail.

"I think Morristown is a wonderful town," says Shaun, who lives in New York City. "On Friday and Saturday, it's very lively and it's very homey. It has the best of both worlds."

How did such a young guy go from being a college student to running three hotspots in one fell swoop? Some of it is serendipity; Moghul's lease was up (it closed on Jan. 1), and Shaun's mother, Sneh, and father, Satish, wanted to try something new. At the same time, they wanted to hire Shaun, who was graduating from New York University's Stern School of Business, as the Mehtani Group's Vice President of Operations.

"I had to negotiate with him," says Sneh, 59, about bringing her son on

board. "He was going [to work] for a consulting company." So she started to haggle. "What are you getting, son?," she asked, telling him, "I will give you better salary, more benefits..."

But for Shaun, it wasn't about the money; he agreed to delay entry into business school and take the job, on the condition that he could apply his vision to the new restaurants.

"I needed to learn hospitality the way you did," was what he told his parents. "I can't just take a running business, because I'll never think I'm good enough in the end."

These spaces definitely bear the fingerprints of the energetic young entrepreneur, who has been designing restaurant interiors for his parents since he was a teenager. Mendhi, which serves Indian dishes, features a multi-level dining area connected by a marble staircase. Dark wood cubbies contrast against the white walls, as do the green chairs and banquettes; the cubbies are filled with artifacts that Mehtani picked up during a trip to India last year. The restaurant will be lit by 23 Fortuny chandeliers (there's that number again). It will offer a lunch buffet like Moghul did — "We would get hate mail [if we didn't]," jokes Shaun — but the menu will have somewhat lighter fare than the rich Mughlai dishes favored at the

old restaurant.

Meanwhile, there's no buffet at Ming II. Shaun lightheartedly describes it as "a closing space" — a place to go and celebrate after closing a big deal. "Get your client drunk," Shaun jokes. "Intimate" is also a good word to describe Ming II: dark carpeting, with running lights coming up over red banquettes, bathing the sweeping poplar-planked ceiling in a warm glow. A glass-enclosed wine cellar is prominently displayed in the dining room. The menu contains the same pan-Asian dishes that the original Ming in Edison has been serving for the last six years, with some more exotic additions.

The two restaurants are connected by SM23, a lounge that Mehtani calls a "moody, romantic space." It features black couches and a backlit, blue onyx bar. On the black walls, customers can see the letters "SM" (Shaun's initials) and the number "23" (big surprise) subtly etched in the plaster. Appetizers are available from Ming II, but the stars here are the drinks; Mehtani has brought in two renowned mixologists from Sydney, Australia to design cocktails that will be exclusive to SM23 and the two restaurants.

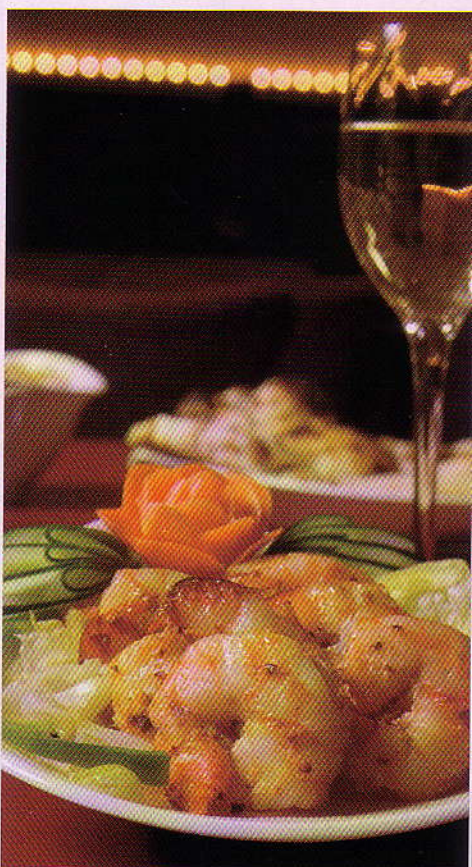
To Shaun, the drinks are as important to the dining experience as the food, which is a philosophy he picked

up while traveling though Europe. "The vodka should be muddled with fresh cranberry juice; [the juice] shouldn't come out of a gun," he says. "It should be stirred properly. It should be tested to make sure it has the right proportion of liquor. Drinking can be like eating, where you can really taste everything."

Customers enter all three spaces via a wood-paneled grand foyer, giving patrons a comfortable place to wait for a table. Shaun even designed the bathrooms with individual rooms and a soothing common area with a bench and a waterfall. And Hyatt guests have the convenience of charging their bills to their room.

It's a pretty complicated operation, but Mehtani is confident that his vision will succeed. "We [knew] that Morristown is becoming younger, more upscale, and the disposable income of people was increasing," he says.

But he'll have some pretty experienced consultants on board: Mom and Dad. "[It's] his restaurant, his personality, his everything," says Sneh. "We have a lot of experience; we are behind him. He needs us, we are there." ■



FAMILY, FOOD AND TRADITION Through their various restaurants, Shaun Mehtani, along with his parents, Sneh and Satish, celebrate the cuisine and culture of Asia; fresh shrimp with spring onion and chiles is a popular appetizer off the Ming II menu; the old Indian art of henna will be complimentary on weekends.

WE LOVE THE NIGHT LIFE

Morristown is experiencing a wave of new spots for "dinner and drinks," each with its own style and personality.



GRASSHOPPER OFF THE GREEN 41 MORRIS ST.

Open for about a year, this latest outpost of the Jersey-based Grasshopper chain has put a unique stamp on Morristown's nightlife. The bar area, loaded with high-def TVs and a large projection system, has already become a destination for sports fans. The airy dining room upstairs evokes a woodland cabin and serves pub favorites, Irish dishes and flavorful specials.



TASHMOO 8 DEHART ST.

Hard to find, but worth it once you're there. Think of an Irish pub, but with an upgraded bar, wood inlay paneling and high-def TV's all around. Serves typical pub favorites for lunch and dinner. Open since August.



GEORGE AND MARTHA'S AMERICAN GRILL 67 MORRIS ST.

Opened in November in the spot formerly occupied by Cutter's Bar, this bright and open space provides "upscale comfort food," from turkey dinners to rack of lamb to tasty burgers. The bar offers a sophisticated spot for happy hour.

— JOEL KELLER