

Dining Out

By Cindy Nevitt
At The Shore

Call Rei Prabhakar and Karen Nelson “crazy” and they’re likely to consider it a compliment. “We opened in November because everybody wants to know who’s crazy enough to open in November,” says Prabhakar, the “Rei” half in Karen & Rei’s 25th Street Café in Avalon. “Everybody is crazy enough to open in May.”

On November 14th, the night the restaurant opened, a northeaster flooded Avalon’s streets, forcing customers to slog through 6 inches of chilly Atlantic Ocean saltwater before they found refuge inside Karen & Rei’s, near the newly opened fireplace.

“We wanted this specific location because it is cozy and small,” Prabhakar says. “We were really banking on the fact everybody would want to know who was crazy enough to open in November, and it’s worked out.”

Satisfied customers have been flocking to Karen & Rei’s ever since that wet opening night.

Some are familiar with the duo from their stint late summer at Clyde’s Steaks in Somers Point.

Others, having heard about Nelson’s nightly fish specials, have trekked to the seaside resort for shrimp, clams and mussels etouffee, baked salmon with ginger, garlic, Thai basil and tomato teriyaki, and pan-seared monkfish, blackened tuna, and grilled Chilean sea bass.

Still others come craving a selection from the “Encyclopedia of Desserts,” which lists among its many temptations White Russian Chocolate Chunk Cheesecake, the Deepest of Deep Dish Apple Pies, Amazing Peanut Butter Pie, Chocolate B-52, Notorious Chocolate Banana Daiquiri and the Original Chocolate Peanut Butter Buzz.

Many of Nelson’s creative confections are assembled from layers of liquor-soaked cake, with Kahlua and Myers rum used most often.

Those acquainted with Prabhakar and Nelson from their days at Clyde’s will find them a changed couple. Nelson has relinquished the bread baking to Prabhakar who expertly rolled dozens of bread sticks and split-top rolls one recent, drizzly Friday morning as he talked about the new restaurant.

“Karen has decided she’s allowing me to do a little more on the food end,” Prabhakar says. “The most important thing is the first thing you’ll see; the bread. The second thing is the same as the last thing you’ll see; the coffee. We control that. We bake the bread and we grind the coffee.”

Prabhakar sees to it that the customers’ first and last impression are not left to chance. Nelson sees to it that the middle portion of the meal isn’t subject to any vagaries either.

“The different fish preparations vary on a night-to-night basis,” she says, “because the fish changes depending upon what’s available.”

She strives to serve fish other than the common North Atlantic species, and has occasionally offered opah, a fish caught off Hawaii and New Zealand.

“It’s a stunning fish just to look at,” says Prabhakar, whose younger brother, along with Nelson, used the opah in creating the logo for the restaurant. “It’s one of the most

enjoyable fish to sell at the table. You come here to get something different, new food, new tastes.

They travel to Philadelphia on their days off to obtain Thai basil and lemongrass, and locatelli and gorgonzola cheeses, among other ingredients.

“People try to figure out the menu,” Prabhakar says. “They say they see signs of French, they see signs if Thai. It’s an eclectic mix of all that’ good.”

It’s truly an American melting pot