

## **25<sup>th</sup> Street Café braves winter with fine food**

**By Michael J. Walsh  
Staff Writer**

Avalon – The cold winter winds began to whip across Seven Mile Beach this week, as gray days settle in for a long frosty stay. But a small light of warmth is burning in Avalon, welcoming those for a taste for the exotic.

Breaking away from the rule that restaurants close for the winter, Karen and Rei's 25<sup>th</sup> St. Café did not even open for business until Nov. 14.

Karen Nelson and Rei Prabhakar opened the café after the owners of the restaurant they were managing in Somers Point unexpectedly decided to close for the winter.

At the 25<sup>th</sup> Street Café, the doors will not be closing any time soon.

"(Almost) everyone else in the area closes for the winter. We want to continue to serve the locals who live in the area," said Prabhakar, who has yet to have a weekend night where he has been able to serve everyone who came to the front door. With 22

seats available at a time, the duo's belief is, "We hope there are at least 22 people out there who want to eat great food."

With its small size, home cooking and a fireplace adding to its ambiance, business has been brisk. Brisk enough, in fact, Karen and Rei are suggesting that weekend patrons call ahead to reserve a table. "We don't want to keep people waiting or turn people away," Prabhakar said.

The specialty of the house adorns the sign outside the restaurant. Opah is a fish that inhabits the waters off New Zealand and Hawaii. The fish is flown in twice a week to Philadelphia, where Karen and Rei pick it up fresh, which is a catchword of the 25<sup>th</sup> Street Café.

"The house rule: We don't do frozen," said Prabhakar. "We make everything ourselves, fresh everyday, from the meals to the sourdough baguettes and the honey-wheat bread. Because of our size, we can do it all fresh. If we don't make it we don't sell it."

Prabhakar, an Avalon native, has been in the

restaurant business for 16 years, while Nelson has been cooking for 4 years. They met when they were working together at the Whitebrier in 1995. Being owners is a first for them. "We are in search of the American Dream," said Prabhakar. "We found this place and decided to try it all."

"We love what we do, and it is a two-person show, with a little help from our friends," he added.

Another touch that the duo added to their restaurant was gallery space. Adorning the walls of the restaurant are works of art on loan from the October Gallery, which recently opened in Smithville.

All the artists presented at the 25<sup>th</sup> Street Café are local. "We want to keep South Jersey artists on the walls. Whenever possible, we've told the gallery we would only like to display South Jersey talent," said Prabhakar.

The duo did not believe the late fall opening was going to be a problem, and in fact, business has been much better than expected. "

We weren't worried because people have been asking where we were going (after the Somers Point restaurant shut down)." said Nelson. "We've kept a mailing list from the people we had in southern Atlantic County area," added Prabhakar.

The cuisine is designed to make everyone happy. One side of the menu is the standard fare with a little of Nelson's magic added, such as true locally created Chicken Avalon and Filet Au Poivre (filet mignon encrusted with black pepper and other ingredients.) And the other side lists specialties that change on a regular basis especially fresh fish dishes. "We specialize in things you can't get everywhere else," said Prabhakar.

If you know what you want, don't be afraid to ask. The specialty of the house is adding natural heat to their foods, with all the natural spices from Jamaica, Mexico and Thailand. "You come in and we will make it the way you want it," said Prabhakar. "If you want spicy, we can more than

accommodate your need for fire.

For those with a sweet tooth, the incredible assortment of homemade desserts, including biscotti, cakes and coffee, is worth the visit. The 25<sup>th</sup> Street Café features the most incredible apple pie you'll ever dig into.

To keep the mood right, the 25<sup>th</sup> Street Café has cool jazz, blues and Sinatra playing at night in the background, and relaxed contemporary like REM and the Beatles in the afternoon.

"We're trying to add something new to the area. To compliment the dining possibilities of the South Jersey area by adding a new choice," said Prabhakar.

Their hours are 11 a.m. to 9 p.m. during the week, 11 a.m. to 10 p.m. Friday and Saturday and 1 to 6 p.m. on Sunday. BYOB. Call 967-4488 for reservations.