

SILICON ALLEYS



Gay Singh

FRENCH CONNECTION At Paris Avenue, all that's missing is Claudine Longet in a miniskirt.

LA VIE EN BIRD

Celebrating Franco-Punjabi alliances in Willow Glen **BY GARY SINGH**

IF YOU FEEL caught between two cultures, between Paris and Punjab, go to Bird and Willow.

A recent infiltration of this neighborhood gave me all the self-improvement ammunition I could possibly want, triggering me to re-explore lost Franco-Punjabi military alliances of centuries past.

You don't need to invade Willow Glen to do this. It can be anywhere in San Jose, highbrow or lowbrow. Any destination that merges the spatial with the temporal provides

a more interesting way to experience one's hometown.

So in this case, just off Willow and Bird, I found Paris Avenue, a French Bakery and Cafe, where the original owners have returned. For years it was called Flower Flour. Now it evokes a more Francophone mystique. As I plowed through a tuna salad sandwich, I expected Claudine Longet to walk through the door in a miniskirt and belt out a syrupy version of "Love Is Blue." Or maybe Edith Piaf. If they were here, I'd invite both of them to join me and talk about Willow Glen history. The nearby Walgreens doesn't have

this effect on me. Paris Avenue does.

Directly across the street, one finds another masterpiece, catering to a different slice of the human condition, a place that takes me back even further.

As I've said before, if Roy's Station in Japantown is the best Buddhist reincarnation of a gas station, then New Indian Cuisine on Willow is the best Punjabi reincarnation of an auto repair shop. That's what the building was 60 years ago.

More recently, though, New Indian Cuisine used to be Sue's Indian Cuisine. Sue's paintings are still on the wall. Her name even remains on some of the dishes, as if no one bothered to proofread the current menu. This is a good thing. It makes the place real. Authentic. Legit. It feels like some roadside eatery in Punjab.

As such, New Indian Cuisine is not for snooty customers or upmarket ambiance. There are no waiters coming over to scrape the crumbs

off the table with one of those metal tools, whatever they're called. You don't come here for the decor. It really feels like India. An old guy in a turban saunters outside to pick lemons from the tree and then uses them in the kitchen. You might see the cook putting a tray of methi leaves outside so they can dry in the sun. They work better that way.

If De Niro in *Goodfellas* can have his own table in the kitchen, in some Manhattan restaurant, well, I can be Raj De Niro and have my own table outside at New Indian Cuisine. That's what any real-city columnist would do, right? Herb Caen and Jimmy Breslin would be proud of me. You know they would.

With these two masterpieces directly across the street from each other, I no longer felt stuck between two cultures. I transported myself back to the 19th century when one of Napoleon's former captains, Jean-François Allard, traveled to the Sikh Kingdom to help modernize Maharaja Ranjit Singh's army. The Franco-Punjabi connection is often overlooked in the histories of South Asia, so as I devoured my tuna salad sandwich at Paris Avenue, I revisited the history.

Allard became one of Ranjit Singh's most trusted generals, taking part in almost every expedition for the Sikhs. It's quite a story.

The Franco-Punjabi connection of Bird and Willow made me fondly recall one of the most distinguished and impeccable scholars I ever witnessed, a one Mr. Jean-Marie Lafont, who delivered a paper at the Sikh Foundation Conference at Stanford a few years back. Lafont was the one who originally helped elevate the story of the French collaboration with the Sikh Kingdom. It was he who brought Allard's story to light, over a lifetime of research and several esoteric history books, mostly in French. Before attending that conference, I had not known this history, and I probably wouldn't now be recalling it if the unique roadside duo of Paris Avenue and New Indian Cuisine did not sit directly across the street from each other in my home town.

I have a new appreciation for Willow Glen. Spacetime definitely shattered over that tuna salad sandwich. I didn't have to go native. I already was. 