

chef competitors are busy preparing their *mises en places*. Dey clips down the line, flashes a large, warm smile. “Hi, I’m Rohini,” she says. “I’m so excited to see what you all have in store for us today!” Less than 15 minutes has ticked by since she walked through the door.

» **Eleven years ago**, with no experience in the restaurant industry, Dey, now 45, left a successful career as an executive at the global consulting giant McKinsey & Company and put \$1 million—most of it from eight private investors—on the line to launch a sexy, spice-laden Latin-Indian fusion restaurant in Chicago, which she named, simply, Vermilion. Six years later, buoyed by its success, she sank \$4.8 million—again, mostly from investors—into creating At Vermilion in New York, now a foodie favorite and one of the city’s go-to sites for corporate events. But food was far from Dey’s first passion.

Running the numbers

180

Number of potential investors Dey approached to help finance her Chicago restaurant

130

Number of dishes Dey tastes each week for quality control

20

Number of pounds of fenugreek, sambar and garam masala used per month at each restaurant

\$6,000

Spice budget per month for dishes at both restaurants

13

Different types of chile used in the recipes at both Vermilions

Born and raised in India, Dey aspired to follow in the footsteps of an uncle who lived in Washington, D.C., and worked for the World Bank. At 12, she walked into the lobby of the World Bank’s New Delhi office, near her school, and asked the receptionists, “How might I acquire a job here?” The three women behind the desk all laughed. They told her to run off, get a PhD and come back later.

And so she did. She began the path toward her PhD in the United States at the University of Texas at Dallas. After her first year, Dey set her sights on one of the World Bank’s 40 coveted summer-intern positions. She wrote to 50 of the top executives and followed up each letter with a call. “I got one or two polite refusals, one from Larry Summers,” she says. The next summer, she asked her PhD adviser to put in a word for her with a friend at the World Bank who worked in the department that handled water and sewage projects. “I sent him a diatribe of an essay on water and sewage,” says Dey. That worked. Dey interned at the World Bank’s D.C. office in the summer of 1994 and then took a leave of absence from her PhD program to work there full time.

In 1996, having logged thousands of miles traveling the globe, Dey returned to Dallas and completed her PhD. Two years later, she married her childhood sweetheart, Sajal Kohli, a consultant. And she was offered a job at McKinsey.

As a young associate, now living in Chicago, Dey traveled nonstop, saturating herself in a different area of business every few months. “For four years, I was on the road from 5AM Monday until 10 or 11PM Thursday,” she says. She ate out a lot, and as she experienced the multitude of flavors from the world’s top restaurants, Dey was struck by two things: the absence of a sophisticated Indian establishment in the U.S. where she could take clients; and the natural affinity between the culinary cultures of Brazil, Ecuador, Peru and Mexico, on the one hand, and the cuisine of India. “You’ll find almost the same foods in a market in Mexico as in an Indian bazaar,” she says. Tamarind, guava, lychee, plantains, corn, cilantro, ginger, lime—the

ingredients began to spin and mix in her head with the dishes she knew from having lived all over India.

One evening in 1999, she, Kohli and another couple were hanging out, relaxing after a long run. The four, all sweaty and hungry, started talking about food. “I believe there’s room for a great Indian restaurant,” Dey remembers saying. Combining Indian flavors with those of Latin America would make something new and exciting, she added. It was the first time she’d voiced the thought. “They all said, ‘If you do it, we’re in!’” she recalls.

Two years later, in early 2001, she got pregnant. After her daughter was born in October, she went on maternity leave. The time off got her thinking about the restaurant. In January 2002, with Kohli’s enthusiastic support, Dey extended her leave by two months to research the possibility of opening a high-end Indian-Latin hot spot.

» **Dey attacked** the challenge with the same total-immersion technique she’d adopted as a consultant, interviewing more than 40 restaurateurs and restaurant managers. In May 2002, she left her toddler in the care of Kohli, by then a director at McKinsey, and their housekeeper-nanny, and went to live for three weeks in the home of a Los Angeles restaurateur, the uncle of a childhood friend from India. Dey shadowed his every move, leaving for his Bel Air–based restaurant at 9 AM and not returning home until after 10 at night. “I got a crash course,” says Dey. “He went through the numbers with me,” says Dey. “I checked them and asked questions. I knew that 90 percent of new restaurants fail.”

» **Dey decided** to take the risk. In December 2002, she handed in her resignation at McKinsey. To raise money, she tapped into her professional network and cold-pitched anyone who seemed appropriate. She also secured a Small Business Administration (SBA) loan. “My McKinsey background enabled me to talk to banks and do the spreadsheets, and gave me cachet with investors,” she says. But nothing during

her consulting days had prepared Dey (then pregnant with her second child) for the misogyny she encountered in her dealings with vendors. “One liquor vendor came up to me, touched me, leaned in too close and said, ‘Honey, why don’t you get your manager for me?’” says Dey. “I remember thinking, Should I kill him on the spot? They don’t expect a woman at the helm. I said, ‘I’ll see you when I’m ready,’ and I kept him waiting.”

Vermilion was scheduled to open in January 2004, but two months before the launch, Dey lost her executive chef. She went on a high-speed interviewing campaign, finally hiring a young, female Indian chef, Maneet Chauhan (who has since become a prominent judge on *Chopped*). And then came the biggest hurdle. Dey’s daughter wasn’t supposed to be born until two weeks after Vermilion’s opening. She arrived five weeks early—and developed the flu after one week. “She had a temperature of 104 degrees,” says Dey. “I sobbed in the hospital. She was so tiny that they couldn’t find her veins. I had to go straight from the hospital to the opening. It was a very unsettling day.”

Her daughter recovered, and soon the restaurant was thriving. Laudatory reviews poured in. Vermilion’s signature dish, Lobster Portuguese, was declared the best dish in the world by *USA Today*. Vermilion, whose name refers to the brightest natural shade of red and in India and Latin America also represents women’s beauty and strength, became profitable within three months.

In 2008, as her fortieth birthday approached, Dey upped the ante and decided to open At Vermilion in New York City. The price tag would be \$4.8 million. Undaunted, Dey leveraged her success in Chicago and attracted celebrity investors such as author Salman Rushdie. On August 8, 2008, Dey got the keys to her new locale, and two days later, Dey and Kohli left for a weeklong trek up Mount Kilimanjaro. At almost 20,000 feet, Dey was truly on top of the world.

Then a scathing review in the *New York Times* in January 2009—six short

paragraphs in the Dining Briefs section—sent Dey’s fortunes tumbling. One of At Vermilion’s signature dishes, a spicy skirt steak cooked in a tandoori oven, was deemed “as stringy and tough as Clint Eastwood.” Reading the review online, Dey “felt like gravity was pulling me to the floor,” she says. “My blood ran cold. I e-mailed all my investors to apologize and told them, ‘If it kills me, I will turn the place around.’”

» **She was on** a plane to New York the next day. “I asked myself, Is there truth to this?” she says. “Until that point I had delegated food quality control to my executive chef.” Dey held tense meetings with her staff. The person in charge of cooking the ill-fated skirt steak was fired; his replacement, making similar repeated mistakes, was fired as well. “At first, I thought it was not my job to quality control the food. But, inevitably, it *is* my job,” says Dey.

Dey returned week after week, tasting every item on the menu and tweaking the cooking so that each dish turned out the way she wanted it. Six months later, Dey had succeeded in turning around At Vermilion’s reputation. Glowing write-ups came from *Gourmet*, *Time* and *Esquire*.

Dey wanted to share what she’d learned about running a restaurant with other women in the field, so she approached her friend Susan Ungaro, president of The James Beard Foundation, about starting a scholarship. In 2012 the two launched the Women in Culinary Leadership Program, offering women chefs the chance not only to intern in the two Vermilion kitchens and at The James Beard House in New York but also to learn how to run a business and tackle discrimination. In the restaurant world, says Dey, “you interact with male landlords, vendors, bankers, and you can see it immediately in their eyes: ‘Why am I talking to a woman?’ I believe that women should invest in themselves and be able to talk in actual numbers. It can’t be all creativity.” *

AMY ZAVATTO is the author of *Architecture of the Cocktail*.