

Tandoor India Restaurant

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Description

The Tandoor India Restaurant is located at 106 South 40th Street, in southwest Philadelphia. It is situated on the block between Chestnut and Sansom streets, in an area known as University City. The name of the establishment is a reference to the way food is prepared there. Since the 16th century, North Indian cuisine has been prepared in large, traditional clay ovens, known as tandoors. This tradition continues at Tandoor India, which offers Mughlai, a very refined style of regional cooking. According to the menu, Mughlai is similar to the food found in Northern India today.

The restaurant is located on the bottom floor of a three-story building, which has a very colorful history. Originally, the site was a residential building which contained four apartments: one on the ground floor, two on the second, and one on the third. No information was available about the original architect and date of construction, though one source¹ speculates that the building was built in the 1920's. The last tenants to live in the building when it was residential were a family "gypsies". Several women of the family ran a palm-reading business in the bottom floor apartments.

In 1984, the building was bought by the Proetto family, who transformed the bottom floor into "Pop's Steaks," a casual, University-area cheesesteak shop. And Robert Proetto, who calls himself a "pseudo-architect," made a few changes to the design of the building. He built a twelve-foot, ground-floor addition onto the left side of the building to create a spacious dining area. The addition runs the length of the building and contains a number of skylights, which give the restaurant a very open, expansive ambiance. The addition also contains the front door to the restaurant, so customers see a very long, inviting dining aisle as soon as they enter.

The original ground floor of the building was converted into dining and kitchen areas. The front third of the original building is for dining, and the back two-thirds for

¹Mr. Robert Proetto, who modified the building's architecture in 1984, made this supposition.

from a restaurant called Shiva. When it closed, Gurmail moved across town to work for the original Maharaja restaurant, which was two doors down from Pop's Steaks.

When Gurmail's brother, Rajinder, came to Philadelphia in 1986, the two brothers and their wives decided to open their own restaurant. The Singh family thought that their clay-oven cuisine would set their restaurant apart from others in the area. So, they scrimped and saved until they had enough money to start their own business. When Pop's steaks went on the market in 1990, the Singhs made their move.

When Gurmail and his family opened the Tandoor India restaurant in 1990, they made very few changes to the original design of Pop's Steaks. They replaced the benches in Pop's steaks with tables, hung green plants by the skylights, and decorated the walls with assorted Indian paintings and brass plates. Also, Tandoor's customers no longer see a cheesesteak grill when they look through the kitchen window. Rather, they see the clay oven, which is one of only four tandoors in Philadelphia.

The minor modifications mentioned above give the restaurant a more sophisticated look than Pop's Steaks had. The tables are tastefully decorated with carnations and candles, which is much more appealing than the plain benches that used to be in Pop's. The significance of the interior decor is two-fold: the Indian fixtures reflect the cuisine and the culture from which it emerged, and the original red and blue tile sets the establishment in its urban context, namely its proximity to the University of Pennsylvania.

Urban Context

An initial visit to the University City neighborhood in which Tandoor India is situated provided us with a general feel for the area. We noted the commercial enterprises which contribute to the social fabric, and took down the names and telephone numbers of several agents who conduct business in the area, such as realtors and social services. A second visit to the area included approximately 45 minutes rent wandering around the block of 40th and Chestnut, making observations and conducting some informal interviews with area merchants.

In our search for the restaurant's sign to confirm our presence in the correct neighborhood, we noticed a surprising number of similar signs, all advertising Indian restaurants. The New Delhi restaurant, Bombay Cuisine, Taj Indian restaurant, and others are all on the same block or are immediately adjacent. Just around the corner we found two Thai restaurants and one Mexican. Many others abound as well, marking this area as an enclave of ethnic foods. The buildings on either side of Tandoor India are: to its left, an apartment building managed by Walter M. Wood, Realtor and, to its right, Frank J. Malone Prosthetics and Orthotics with "parking in rear". At first glance, Tandoor India does not seem particularly distinctive. It is likely that the five restaurant reviews from local newspapers hanging in the front window, as well as some positive word-of-mouth, draw customers to this establishment.

These restaurant reviews describe the Tandoor India's clientele as "mostly university students, neighborhood residents and those of Indian background" as well as "members of that informal culinary network who pass on the names of good Indian restaurants" (Phila. Inquirer 6/12/92). There was also mention of students from The Restaurant School frequenting the establishment. A discount of 20% is offered with a student I.D.; this makes already-cheap food even more appealing to UPenn students, who lack a weekend meal plan. Since the restaurant is not licensed to sell alcoholic beverages, customers are welcome to bring their own beer or wine. On both visits we noted the

presence of students, both Caucasian and Indian, and older Indian adults. Two of the students were speaking Spanish, leading us to believe that they were international students³. On the second visit, we also noticed two Caucasian couples (one with two small children) who did not appear to reside in the neighborhood. Two older Indian men who had been spotted eating in the restaurant were later seen entering their respective taxi cabs and driving out of the neighborhood. We also spoke for a few moments outside the restaurant with an older, heavily-accented gentleman who claimed to live in one of the above apartments and described himself as coming from Eretria, in Africa.

Inquiries to realtors leasing apartments in the area were made, in hopes of better grasping the residential scheme of the community. Mr. Witt Garrett of Steven M. Glass Realtor quoted rents in the area of University City as ranging from \$350 to \$450 per month, with "mainly students" holding the leases. He neither cared to elaborate as to what *percentage* of the tenants were students, nor was he willing to estimate the breakdown of ethnicities. We then spoke to a representative from a realtor advertising itself as "Student Apartments". She commented that many of the residents of the block and in the immediate vicinity are UPenn students or employees, and that the neighborhood is "not family-oriented"

Vince Cenci of Mahoney & Associates Realtors described the clientele of the surrounding neighborhood (as he defined it, from 38th to 44th streets) as a "melting pot from the university". The apartments leased by this realtor range in rents from \$400 to \$800, depending on their proximity to the University of Pennsylvania's campus. Mr. Cenci also described the area as one that is currently undergoing tremendous growth due to the presence of "the new Restaurant School as well as the hospital". Interviews conducted over the telephone as well as those with various locals did not seem to shed any light on how either of these institutions would directly affect the growth of the area.

³One informant, Bryn Mawr College student Saloni Hora, told us that the ethnic restaurants around UPenn are popular with the "more open-minded" and "adventurous" international student crowd.

John Folia of The Restaurant School responded to our request for a telephone interview. He spoke of the school's move to University City from its former location in Center City (20th & Walnut) in May of 1991. He cited as advantageous factors the comparatively larger space; the consolidation into one building rather than four; the availability of the school's own parking facilities; and, perhaps most importantly, the fact that the school owns rather than leases the current premises.

Mr. Folia emphasized that this institution is in no way affiliated with the University of Pennsylvania. It is a trade or technical school offering a 15-month program leading to a specialized associates' degree to students ranging in age from 18 to 66 years, with an average in the mid-to-late twenties; most of these students have worked in some other industry prior to enrolling in the school. He described the students as mostly commuting from the greater Philadelphia area (including Pennsylvania and New Jersey suburbs), with only 10% living in the immediate vicinity and housed through the university. Another 5% commute daily from southern New Jersey. As far as Mr. Folia knew, none of the current chef students are doing their 12-month internship with any of the Indian restaurants in the area, although the school does teach the preparation of ethnic foods to complement their "primarily upscale continental food" instruction.

Intercultural Family Services, located at 4225 Chester Ave., provides a variety of social services to clients in southwest Philadelphia who are, for the most part, referred to them from both the Department of Human Services and the Division of Juvenile Justice.⁴ The exceptions to this rule are the center's three-days-a-week after-school and summer programs for school-age children, which welcome neighborhood children as walk-ins. The center also offers a Healthy Start program for expectant mothers; a weekly food service for the homeless; an AIDS education program; and Services for Children in their Own Home (SCOH), which provides counseling services, parenting skills and budgeting

⁴As explained by Ann Hannibal, secretary. Intercultural Family Services formerly operated as the Philadelphia Refugee Service Center.

instruction, and acts as a liaison to housing agencies. Nyen, the receptionist, described the local population as representing "all different cultures", including Cambodian, Chinese, Vietnamese, and Indian. She claims that the above ethnicities are all represented by restaurants in the vicinity.

We also found the Victim Support and Special Services police station on Walnut between 39th and 40th streets. This agency operates through the university and is staffed by UPenn police, but it services the general area as well. We spoke to several of the employees of this office who informed us that they deal with assault, rape, theft, filing criminal complaints, and providing protection against abuse. One officer mentioned the proximity of "the projects" to the area as contributing to the population and to criminal activity. As we left the station, the young white officer sternly reminded us that we were "not in Bryn Mawr anymore" and locked the glass door behind us.

A McDonald's restaurant occupies a street corner across from Tandoor India, on 40th and Walnut. We observed a mix of Caucasians and African-Americans eating here, amidst some rather intimidating alarm systems and "no loitering" signs. We were surprised to see such security measures in a fast-food restaurant. There were noticeably fewer Caucasians, but more than had been seen on the streets. We were informed that a shootout had taken place here at some point within the last year.

Two young women working at the J&J Laundromat diagonally across the street from Tandoor described the clientele of their establishment as "mostly blacks". When asked to verify whether there was also a substantial Indian population in the vicinity to justify its being referred to as "Little India", they responded affirmatively. Three Indian men had been seen exiting the laundromat just moments before.

Finally, we investigated the First Unisex Hair Salon, situated directly across the street from Tandoor. Upon entering we noticed approximately twenty people, including hair stylists and clients. They were all African-American. We spoke to a male hairstylist who told us that the neighborhood consisted of a mixture of ethnicities, but could not be

more specific than that. His response was similar to that of the others with whom we informally chatted.

Our perception of the makeup of the neighborhood based on these visits and conversations provoked us to ask several questions. Several people had described the area as a remarkably "mixed" neighborhood containing representatives of "many different" ethnicities. The distribution seemed to be nonetheless rather unbalanced. Although many of Tandoor's patrons were Indian, we were hard-pressed to find even a few Indians or South Asians in other neighborhood contexts. None of our informants were able to give percentage estimates of ethnicity, even though it seemed rather apparent to us that such an estimate could reasonably be made.

Demographics

By looking at the 1990 Census of Population and Housing, one can get a general picture of the neighborhood surrounding the Tandoor India Restaurant. The district is located in Tract 88 of Philadelphia, an area which comprises 9,190 of the 1,585,577 people living in the city. After sifting through the data, we noticed some rather interesting trends. First, the neighborhood seems to be youthful; the highest concentration of people are between the ages of 18-24. This area also seems marginal economically with a large number of residents living under the poverty level. Finally, it is a diverse neighborhood with 1,321 of its residents being born outside of the United States (840 of which immigrated within the past ten years). All these trends seemed skewed, though, by the abnormally large number of persons between the ages of 18 and 24.

The data in Table One shows that of the 7,412 people over the age of three who are enrolled in school 7,295 are in college. This suggests that a large number of the residents of this neighborhood are students at nearby colleges. The assertion is also supported by the fact that in 1990 only 779 people in this tract lived in the same home as they did in 1985. In addition, census data reveals that of the 4,683 people (age sixteen and over) not in the labor force 4,101 of them are enrolled in school. The younger students, living at home, are obviously supported by their parents. Likewise, the college students are also supported by parents and have lessened economic responsibilities. The income of the college students would probably be recorded in the lower end of the economic scale, even though their actual spending/economic power is much greater.

If the assertion made above is correct about the community being mostly made up of college students, this would skew the reported income levels recorded in the census data. The total number of households with an income of under \$5,000 was 590, and of these 116 received public assistance (the average income was \$4,145)⁵. The data also

⁵This is a decrease from 1980 census data. In their study of income and poverty status in 1979, the census bureau found that 162 households were on

records 1,289 single people living alone in this district. One can assume from these figures that a significant portion of those single person households must be college students with low incomes. If there really were 590 households with a total income of less than \$5,000 not including students, one would expect that a higher percentage would be receiving public assistance.

That leaves the question of how to determine what the economic nature of this Tract would look like without the students. From looking at Table Two, the economics of this area seem rather dismal. The economic situation for women householders, particularly those with children, looks bleak. But, on the other hand, the income level listed for married families seems to be lower class but not destitute. This is supported by the data describing employment. The vast majority of residents work in lower paying white-collar, professional related services mostly in the Center City area.⁶ Because most people work in the area, 2,424 are able to walk to their sites of employment.

There are 2,600 housing units in Tract 88, and 281 were vacant at the time of the 1990 census. Of the 2,319 which are occupied, only 84 (or 3.6%) were owner-occupied. Thus, the vast majority are renters, the average rent being \$457. While the census does not report the quality of the housing available, it does report that most of the units were built prior to 1939. Most housing complexes either hold five to nine or more than fifty units, with units that either do not have a bedroom or have only one. This data seems to portray a neighborhood with a dense, but not overcrowded population with an average of 3.96 people per unit.

Within this neighborhood, there is a wide range of racial and ethnic groups. The majority of the neighborhood is comprised of people who would be categorized racially as being white, yet come from a wide variety of European ethnic backgrounds (see Table

public assistance and 29.9% of the families were living below the poverty level. By 1989, that percentage had dropped to 22.9%.

⁶Out of the 4,017 employed persons sixteen years of age or over, 2,450 are employed in professional and related services and 651 are employed in wholesale and retail trade.

Three). The next largest group is the Asian community, but by looking at Table One one can see that the majority of the White and Asian populations are made up of college students and thus the numbers might be artificially inflated. The Black population seems to be located in the north end of the district and thus farther away from the University of Pennsylvania, and less than half of this racial group are college students.

One ethnic group which is missing from the census data is the Indian population. They are not included in the Asian and Pacific Islander category and so they fall into the "other" category when looking at racial breakdowns. Unfortunately, they are also not included in the breakdown of ancestries either, which seems peculiar considering that this is an area know to have a significant Indian population. This seems to be a fault of the census data itself. While they counted the 14 Danish people and 13 Romanians in this Tract, they have missed an important community in this area.

After completing our study of the census data, we were able to visit the area and confirm many of our hypotheses. For example, we noted that there were many student apartment buildings and houses, most of which were fraternities. The neighborhood did not seem as run down in the southern, Penn section of the district where the Tandoor India restaurant is located. The University has renovated and built many structures, which has probably encouraged other businesses to move into the area. The northern area showed less economic prospects and the buildings seemed more worn. There also seemed to be more small independent stores than national chains, perhaps indicating that the chains did not think that the area would support their business. Overall, this ethnically diversified area consisting primarily of college students is on the lower end of the economic scale but showing some signs of economic renewal.

Table One

<u>Race</u>	<u>Population</u>	<u>In College</u>
White	6,428	5,591
Black	1,177	532
American Indian, Eskimo or Aleut	61	11
Asian or Pacific Islander	1,415	1,070
Other	1097	91

Table Two

Household Average Income	\$18,190
Female Householders with no husband	66
Worked in 1989	13
Had related children under 18	62
Average income	\$8,656
With children under 18	\$7,738
No children under 18	\$10,352
Married Couple Families	256
Householder worked in 1989	227
With related children under 18	82
Average Income	\$32,063
With children under 18	\$33,290
No children under 18	\$31,485

⁷The Hispanic community in this area seems to be relatively small. Thus, they are often not specially mentioned in the census data and fall into the "other" category.

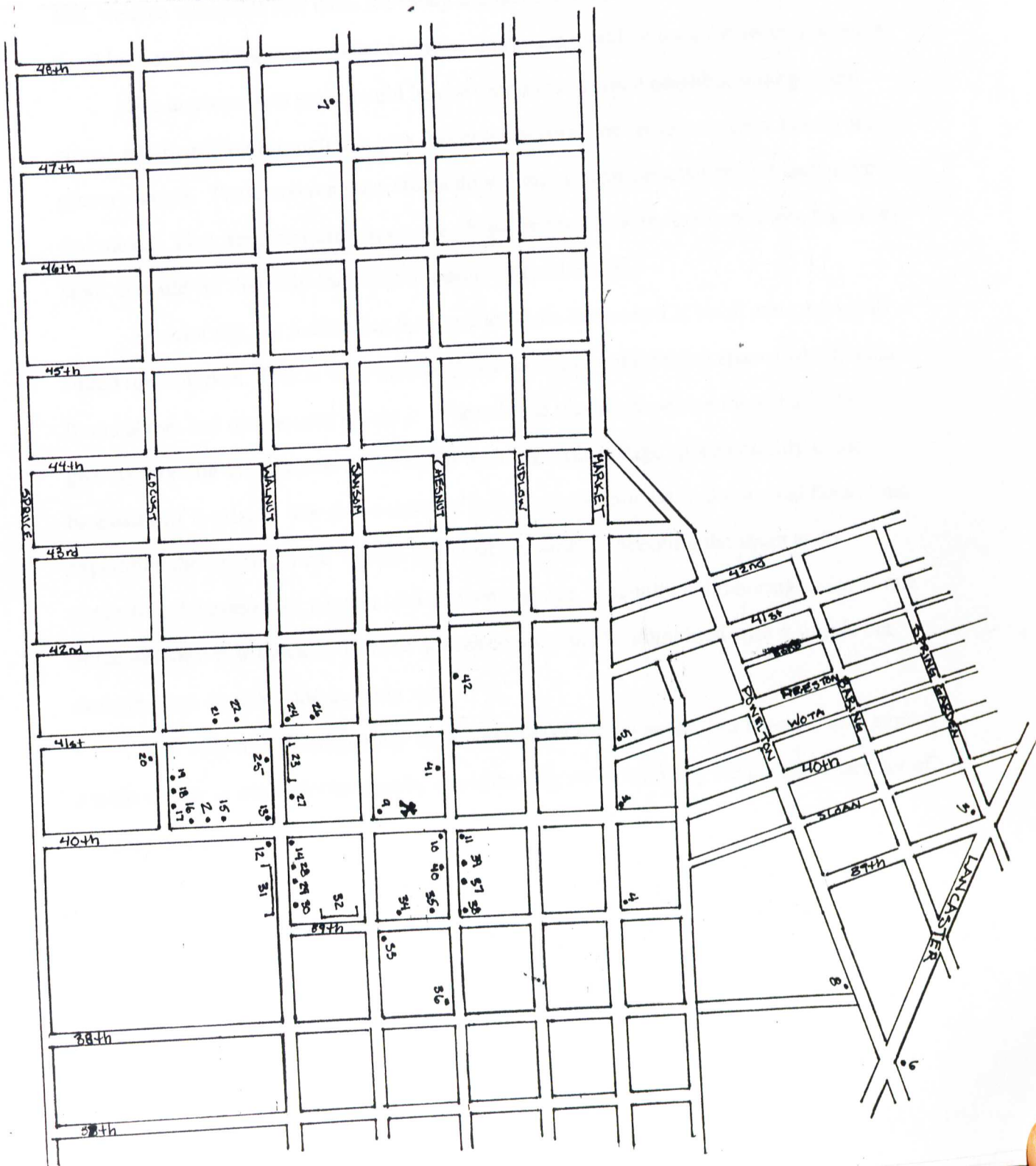
Table Three

ANCESTRY:

	538
English	1,247
German	880
Irish	469
Italian	673
Polish	778
Russian	3,424
Other (including Indian)	

Map Legend

- X Tandoor India Restaurant
- 1 Market-Frankford Line Stop
- 2 University City Post Office
- 3 Sixteenth District Police Station
- 4 Social Security Administration--West Philadelphia Branch
- 5 State Liquor Store
- 6 Walnut Child Care Center
- 7 West Philadelphia High School
- 8 Drew Elementary School
- 9 Bombay Cuisine
- 10 Jay's Dry Cleaners
- 11 First Fidelity Bank
- 12 Free Library of Philadelphia--West Philadelphia Branch
- 13 Burger King
- 14 McDonald's
- 15 Eric 3 Cinema
- 16 Uni-Mart
- 17 MAC Machine
- 18 University City Nautilus
- 19 Parking Lot
- 20 Urban Outfitters
- 21 Jon L. Richter, Dentist
- 22 Urban and Bye Realtors
- 23 University of Pennsylvania Apartments
- 24 House of Spices (India) Inc.
- 25 Office of Off Campus Living, University of Pennsylvania
- 26 Taj India Restaurant
- 27 Christian Science Reading Room
- 28 University of Pennsylvania Police Mini Station
- 29 AMC Walnut Mall 3
- 30 PNC Bank
- 31 University of Pennsylvania Housing
- 32 University of Pennsylvania Apartments
- 33 Curly's Laundry and Cleaners
- 34 Treatment Research Center, University of Pennsylvania
- 35 University of Pennsylvania Federal Credit Union
- 36 7-11
- 37 The Church Of Latter Day Saints
- 38 Roy Roger's
- 39 Ronald McDonald House
- 40 National Center on Adult Literacy-Literary Research
Center of the University of Pennsylvania
- 41 New Delhi Restaurant
- 42 Church of God



Alternative Use

We thought that the Tandoor India Restaurant was rather unique among its competition in that it has the authentic Tandoor oven. It is also an inexpensive establishment with good food that caters to both students and the larger Indian population. But, we also recognize that there are many Indian restaurants on this block and that in a neighborhood lacking many social services, this space could be used for better purposes.

For instance, this space could be converted into a small neighborhood grocery store. After walking through this area, we noted several convenience stores, but no actual grocery stores. These convenience stores do sell many basic necessities, but lack produce and meats. They are also quite expensive. If the restaurant were converted into a grocery store, it could fill this void for a wider variety of food needs.

Structurally, we realize that the Tandoor India Restaurant is small and perhaps ill suited for a market. That is why we would like to utilize neighboring spaces which include floors above and row houses beside it. One scheme that we developed is to have the grocery store on the first two floors of the building with storage space possibly in the basement (if it exists). We also wanted to build the extension up to the second floor, thus expanding the existing area. Due to logistical questions concerning the stairs and expanding the extension, another idea that we had was to acquire neighboring space in one of the adjacent row houses. The two spaces could easily be combined with a simple cut through, thus doubling the existing space.

Not only would our grocery store carry general food needs, but it would also stock a wide variety of ethnic foods thereby strengthening and reinforcing the diverse character of the neighborhood.



The Exterior of the Tandoor India Restaurant

Another View of the Exterior





View of 40th Street Where Tandoor
India is Located



Interior of Restaurant--View
Towards Front (the Addition)



Interjit Singh, cook and brother-in-law of owner at the
Tandoor oven

Close Up View of the Tandoor Oven

