The Whip In
A Taste of Austin-Americana

The Whip In, a convenience store situated on the I-35 access road south, heading toward San Antonio, began as a gas station that, like most, sold porn, pork rinds, entire rows of candy, and coolers of cheap beer. Today, a mural of the Hindu goddess Gayatri greets visitors at the door, one of her eight hands holding a frothy mug, its head running over, another a glass of red wine.

Store owners Chandan and Amrit (“Joe”) Topiwala bought the Whip In in 1986, when the popularity of imported beers was booming. That tremendous demand, along with the stiff competition with other service stations along I-35, inspired the Topiwalas to adapt. “It was a no-win with gas,” Chandan and Joe’s son Dipak explains, “and a win-win with imports.”

Along with wine and a spectacular selection of beers, the Whip In now sells Texas-grown produce, whatever area farmers have at hand. Today, in wooden crates in the middle of the store, it’s Vidalia onions, lemons and limes, Gala apples, and grapefruit. In one row of coolers are prepared entrees from Amy’s Kitchen, milk and eggs from Organic Valley, Odwalla juices, eggs from Organic Valley, Odwalla juices, and in another, pouches of loose-leaf tobacco, and incense candles. In place of condoms and lube is a rack of herbal tinctures and salves by Texas Medicinals.

And in the southern tradition, the Whip In is a grocery that doubles as a restaurant. In December 2008 the store began serving Gujarati food (“Gandhi’s home cooking,” Chandan tells me), hybridized to meet Texas tastes. Chips and queso con chutney. The Silly Cheesesteak “Panaani”—locally raised roast beef with onion masala and Austin Slow Burn queso, toasted on house-made naan bread. Whip Indianized Texas Beef and Lone Star Beer Chili.

“It’s my recipe,” Dipak explains. “Mum wouldn’t touch it at first, when I made it.” Chandan is a strict vegetarian. “She’s never had a bite. But once she decided to start making it, she made it better than me. Her sense of spices, her experience cooking, you know.”

Tender chunks of braised beef; spices I can’t identify aside from cumin and what I think is cardamom (“There are fifteen in all,” Dipak says); tiny cubes of potato. Tasting Chandan’s chili has made me rethink my notions of the dish.

Dipak has a boyish face and an easy smile, his blue Whip In baseball cap worn low, a Hindu whip In baseball cap worn low, a Hindu tilaka on the middle of his forehead, barely visible below the well-formed brim. He pairs beers with the various panaanis and rice bowls like a sommelier would wine. The bar features tap beers from Belgium (Chouffe Houblon Dobbelen Tripel, Gulden Draak Triple Brown Ale, Delirium Tremens) alongside regional and national microbrews (Live Oak from Austin and Real Ale from Blanco; Deschutes from Portland and Dogfish Head from Rehoboth Beach, Delaware). The menu board reads that they pour “20 ounce Post-Colonial” pints.

“I have to explain it,” Dipak says. “Sometimes twice.” I’m one of those who needs explaining.

A notice at the bar announces viewings of The Colbert Report every night at 10:30, on the tiny TV beside the ice-cream cooler. Above the taps a portrait of Gandhi, tinged in turquoise, hangs side by side with a knock-off Shepard Fairey Obama. Obama looks pensive, Gandhi, mirthful, like he’s on the receiving end of a lewd joke. Both peer out over the small Parlour Café (it only seats thirty-two).

In Austin, young, old, and middle-aged go out, to step at the Continental Club or to have buckets of beer and watch movies at the Alamo Drafthouse, or to run their dogs at Auditorium Shores, overlooking Town Lake. The Austinites who fill the booths in the Parlour Café look more Friends than South Park, more thirty-something casual than thrill-store flannel and Converse All-Star ironic. They buy beer and wine and chat politely. Others wait patiently by the registers for a table to open up, as the fire marshal prohibits standing in the Parlour Café, so tight is the space.

Each table in the dining area has Sriracha Thai hot chili sauce and kitschy candles of Hindu gods. My group of...
friends pushes together two tables to make one long booth, big enough to accommodate the eight of us, a quarter of the café’s capacity. There’s a one-dollar “corkage” fee on beers bought singly from the broad selection in the coolers, brews from Vietnam, Russia, and Chile alongside frat-boy standards like Tecate and Lone Star. Peenesh, who came to Texas to attend Rice University and then served in Iraq before returning, rises from our table to go after a Lone Star tallboy.

“I want to see if they have the gumption to charge the corkage fee,” he says.

They do.

My friends are a pretty representative sampling of hyphenated America. We are Indian-, Chinese-, and African-American, and white, too—a hodgepodge group of transplants to Texas. This movement, from elsewhere to here, is what Americans do.

Jon points to the Guinness mirror on the wall above our booth, to the batiks draped around the café. “It looks like a dorm room,” he jokes. “Décor by Urban Outfitters.”

“All that’s missing is the Nag Champa box,” Elyse says.

Still, she remarks how “neighborhoody” the place feels, which is true but odd. The Whip In borders and claims the Travis Heights neighborhood. Travis Heights means upscale. It’s one of Austin’s hippest. But “hip” doesn’t best describe the Whip In.

On the tiny alcove “stage” (two small amps against the east wall) there’s live music, sometimes as often as five nights a week. Singer/songwriter James McMurtry plays here (yes, that McMurtry, Larry’s son), as does Nigerian belter (by way of Rochester, New York) Kalu James, the experimental 3Jazzcollective, rockers Neal Kassanoff and the Undetermineds. Saturday afternoons, it’s raga music, on sarod and tabla. During last year’s South by Southwest music festival, the Alash Ensemble, from southern Siberia, performed traditional Tuvan throat singing.

Our group listens to Lee Barber and Scrappy Jud Newcomb pick guitars and sing melancholy ballads. We talk over the music, loud enough to be heard but not so

Above: Multicultural America is made manifest at Austin’s Whip In convenience store. Photograph by Jonathan Wei © 2010.
lout that we disturb Lee and Scrappy Jud. We’re a group who value debate, even at the risk of it devolving into argument. We talk about race and politics and religion, our East Coast upbringings betraying our southern relocation.

Peenesh says, “The newspaper by the door says this place won the ‘Best Convenience Store’ in Austin the past few years. The Monarch, over where we live, won it the years before that.”

“And so?” says Jon.

“The Monarch is owned and operated by a Pakistani family,” Peenesh explains.

The legacy of partition, even here.

And so we’re eating, and so we’re talking—and me, I’m thinking about this place. The Whip In is multicultural America made manifest, not so much a melting pot as what Calvin Trillin, describing Canadian multiculturalism in a recent New Yorker article, called “a lumpy stew.” The Topiwalas are originally from the Gujarat state, and while Indian influences are everywhere around the store, the Whip In is decidedly American all the same.

I want to ask Dipak about the place where tradition meets Texas and what ensues. I ask about his *tilaka* instead, the “third eye” he wears in the middle of his forehead.

“It’s a scar, actually,” he tells me, and laughs. “I was making pancakes for my daughter one morning and the hot batter splashed up.”

“Poetic irony,” he says.

“Older generations want to dichotomize,” he goes on. “Me, I choose not to choose.” He points to my near-empty bowl of Whip Indianized Chili, his version of the Texas staple marked by South Asian overtones. “It doesn’t matter where it comes from, just that it tastes good.”