



TOPPING THE CHARTS

Madurai boy **Chef Vijaya Kumar** has bagged a James Beard award this year and his restaurant Semma has been ranked No. 1 in NYT's annual list of 100 best restaurants



Q.

What does it mean to win the 2025 James Beard Award for Best Chef: New York State?

It is a recognition not just of my cooking, but of the food I grew up with in Tamil Nadu, the kind of food that's rarely seen in fine dining. We did not tone it down or simplify it. This is also a win for my team and for immigrant cooks everywhere.

Q.

How is Indian cuisine evolving on the global culinary scene?

It is becoming more regional. There is more focus on real stories and real flavours. Indian food is finally being seen in all its depth, and that shift is long overdue. From day one, our goal at Semma was to move beyond the typical, beyond the small fraction of what Indian food really is.

Q.

Who are your culinary inspirations?

My biggest inspirations are my mother and grandmother. They cooked with instinct, patience and heart, and shaped everything I do in the kitchen. I admire chefs who push boundaries without losing their sense of identity. That kind of quiet confidence really resonates with me.

Q.

What is your most innovative dish?

Our *nathai pirattal*—snails cooked with spices and tamarind—is one I'm especially proud of. This is a dish from my village that you'd never expect to see in a New York restaurant. We kept it traditional but plated it with intention. The balance of staying rooted while shifting the context is what innovation means to me.

—with Bindu Gopal Rao