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# Ethnic market tours

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By Zak Stambor  
Special to the Tribune  
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Just about every Friday night David and Catherine Shapiro of Glenview eat at Niles' Himalayan Restaurant. But they're not too adventurous. They eat some combination of the eight or nine items, like Tandoori chicken and lamb biryani, they are familiar with.

But just because they always order the same things doesn't mean they wouldn't like to know more about Indian cuisine.

"Indian food is our favorite food," Catherine Shapiro said. "We'd like to go to India someday, but before we do, we'd like to know more about it."

And don't get Catherine started on her attempts at cooking Indian food. Her attempts, she said, never come close to the food at Himalayan Restaurant.

That is what led the Shapiros to sign up for the recent [Devon Avenue](#) Ethnic Market Tour. It was led by Rebecca Wheeler, a tour guide and cooking instructor who has worked in the kitchen at Trotters to Go, served as an extern under [Grant Achatz](#) at Trio and attended cooking school in northern Thailand, pastry school at Le Cordon Bleu in Paris and studied under Indian cookbook author Julie Sahni. The four-hour tour includes two Indian snack shops, a grocery, a handicraft store, a Pakistani barbecue and a southern Indian restaurant.

Wheeler's customers range in age from 20-something to 60-something and run the gamut in adventurousness and cooking knowledge.

"I want to demystify shopping and eating on Devon," Wheeler said. "After the tour, I hope people are comfortable going in, and know what the key ingredients are."

For instance, as she led her Devon tour into Patel Brothers grocery, she stopped at the store's extensive spice aisle. She urged the group to buy whole spices ("they stay a lot fresher because there is less surface area exposed to light and air") and highlighted a few techniques to use the spices ("you can maximize dry spices' flavor by toasting them in a hot pan with or without oil").

The tours grew out of Wheeler's private classes. In 2005, she began offering cooking tours through Lincoln Square's Wooden Spoon cooking school. She would take students on a tour of Argyle Street's Asian markets before they headed to Wooden Spoon to cook. Those tours were so fun and successful that Wheeler decided to start her own business.

She offers Saturday and Sunday tours of Argyle and Devon streets, as well as Chinatown and Andersonville for \$85 per person. Available dates and times are on Wheeler's Web site, [rebeccawheeler.com](#).

To find new tour locations, she uses her own experience, asks cabdrivers and scours message boards and other online food forums.

"I want to take people places they otherwise wouldn't know of," she said.

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Growing up in an Indian family, and having eaten at many Indian restaurants in the Chicago areas - Himalayan is consistently top quality. I don't know what sort of magic they are going on in the kitchen, but their naan is the fluffiest I have ever eaten.

*KXB73 (11/04/2009, 1:11 PM)*

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