

All Foreign restaurant chains are trying their luck in the New York market. Lucky for us, they're a lot more interesting than Applebee's.

By **Nancy Davidson** Photographs by **Ryan Messina**

# abroad!

**O**n the corner of Lexington and 26th Street, a new South Indian vegetarian restaurant, **Saravanaas** (81 Lexington Ave, 212-679-0204), sits idle, awaiting its first customer. The decor is in place—fuchsia silk wall hangings and beige banquettes—and the menu has been set for months. Although restaurant openings are delayed all the time, often because ConEd hasn't shown up to turn on the gas, Saravanaas is different: The restaurant is the first NYC branch of a 30-restaurant Indian chain with

locations in Singapore, Malaysia, Canada and California—and the holdup concerns immigration. Franchise owners Veena Ramaiah and her father, Nathaiah, are waiting for six chefs from India (they should arrive soon) because the parent company, Saravana Bhavan, insists that only chefs who have been trained at the corporation's culinary institute can cook in its restaurants. This is a hard case to make to U.S. immigration officials, who seem to think that six chefs should be easy enough to find on American soil.

Nevertheless, Nathaiah Ramaiah is patiently waiting; chain restaurants, after all, are built on consistency, and he can't simply grab some Indian cooks from 6th Street. In the Saravanaas model, each chef has one specialty, like sauce-making, and he is trained to do that task so the parent company can maintain quality control. The chefs are willing to serve this singular duty because the chain, like a large corporation, provides generous benefits like health and life insurance, education for the chefs' families and even housing in the city. ▶