

A vibrant street scene in Chicago, likely in the South Loop or Loop area, featuring a mix of historic brick buildings and modern storefronts. The street is filled with cars, and pedestrians are walking on the sidewalk. The scene is captured during the day with bright sunlight creating long shadows. A large orange circle is superimposed over the center of the image, containing the title text in white serif font. The background shows a mix of architectural styles, including multi-story brick buildings and modern storefronts with awnings. The street is lined with parked and moving vehicles, and the sidewalk is populated with pedestrians. The overall atmosphere is one of a busy, diverse urban environment.

# Chicago's Magnificent Melting Pot





**Devon Avenue, in Chicago's West Ridge neighborhood, may not be the city's most renowned locale, but it has become a diverse international marketplace with a rich blend of culture, food and religion — and it's bringing people together**

**BY STEPHEN J. LYONS**  
PHOTOGRAPHY BY TODD WINTERS





YOU CAN GO HOME AGAIN, BUT THAT HOME WILL NEVER be the same and, if too much time passes, you just might become terribly disoriented. This thought hit me as a CTA bus deposited me on Devon Avenue, in Chicago's West Ridge neighborhood, also called West Rogers Park.

Far from Millennium Park and Navy Pier, Devon Avenue, on the northwest edge of the city, was once my downtown; my Magnificent Mile. From 1968 until I graduated from Mather High School in 1973, my entire life played out on Devon. We ate slices at Il-Forno Pizzeria, bought our school clothes at Crawford's Department Store and, at Rosen's Drugs, I had my very first job, delivering prescriptions on a huge red, one-speed bike, circa the Industrial Revolution.

At that time, Devon teemed with Eastern European bakeries and delis where English was broken, not spoken. I was one of the lone goyim (non-Jews), in a neighborhood of almost all Jews, but that did not stop me from taking the same religious holidays off from public school as my yarmulke-wearing friends.

As Irving Cutler wrote in *The Encyclopedia of Chicago*, Jewish families began leaving neighborhoods on the south and west sides of Chicago after World War II for "higher-status West Rogers Park (West Ridge) on the far North Side. The end of the 20th century, West Rogers Park had emerged as the largest Jewish community in the city."

Today, on Devon Avenue, that Jewish shtetl, or neighborhood, has mostly vanished, replaced by a more-diverse business mix. As I walk down the street trying to match memory to the present, I pass Awami Bazaar; Pak Sweets; Tel-Aviv Kosher Bakery; Patel Brothers grocery, Patel Café and Patel Handicrafts; the Croatian Cultural Center of Chicago; Pakistan Fashion; Raj Jewels; Islamic Books & Things; Tiffin; Hema's Kitchen; Kol Tuv Kosher Foods; and Robert's Fish Market.

If there is a two-word phrase that describes the opposite of gentrification, it is *Devon Avenue*. Approximately



Susan Patel of  
Patel Handicrafts

half of the neighborhood's residents were born in another country. You will hardly find a familiar chain business on Devon, but you can buy a cup of masala tea, a warm loaf of challah or rye bread, handmade outfits for your entire Indian wedding party and miniature Hindu temples with the elephant deity Ganesh inside. You can go vegetarian,





carnivore, kosher or halal. You can pray in a synagogue, a mosque or a church.

As the alderman of Chicago's 50th Ward, also known as West Ridge, Debra Silverstein tells me that the business district on Devon Avenue is one of a kind. "You will not find anything like it in terms of the authenticity of the stores anywhere else in Chicago," she says. "If you are looking for

chain or big-box stores, Devon Avenue is not the place for you. The street is lined by small businesses, owned largely by hardworking immigrants who bring a fresh and authentic atmosphere to their shops. Directly across the street from my office is a kosher bakery, right next door to an Indian/Pakistani restaurant. There is nowhere else in Chicago that you can taste the authentic flavors of so many cuisines in one





Devon Avenue is always bustling with activity.

really popular among the Russian Jews and the Romanians.”

An employee interrupts our conversation and hands Esther a lump of dough. She explains: “Every time they make a new dough I remove a piece, say a prayer and then burn the dough. It’s a woman’s blessing; one of our mitzvahs.”

Religious rituals are never far from Susan Patel’s mind either. As owner of Patel Handicrafts, she stocks thousands of goods, including religious items for Hindus such as altars, temples, idols, dhol drums, deity jewelry sets, ceremonial pooja clothes and cooking vessels made of stainless steel and terra-cotta. Her small store — packed floor to ceiling with merchandise — is similar to what you might find in an alleyway in India or in a Middle Eastern souk. “Anything you need for your religious practices, we sell,” Patel says. “I think

it’s very important to hold onto our heritage, our religion, our culture, and I think you can do it through food and religion.”

Susan was raised in the nearby Chicago suburb of Skokie and educated at Long Island University in Southampton, New York. She has just returned from India, where she bought \$75,000 worth of inventory from small villages, inventory that is in transit to her store via container ship. I ask her why so many South Asians have moved to West Ridge and established businesses on Devon.

“It was affordable,” she says. “It was near public transportation. It was a bustling area. The Jewish community was a very easy community to work with and assimilate into because they had such strong religious practices, and I think that Hindus and Muslims also have such strong practices.





**Some of Babu Patel's wedding dresses for sale**

**GETTING THERE**  
**American Airlines** offers a total of 493 peak-day flights to **Chicago (ORD)** from 116 cities in 11 countries, with 94 of those flights from our hubs, including **Charlotte (CLT)**; 10 flights a day), **Dallas/Fort Worth (DFW)**; 18), **Los Angeles (LAX)**; 10), **Miami (MIA)**; 11), **New York (JFK)**; 2 and **LGA**; 16), **Philadelphia (PHL)**; 9), **Phoenix (PHX)**; 9) and **Washington, D.C. (DCA)**; 9).

**QUICK FACTS**

**ABOUT CHICAGO'S WEST RIDGE NEIGHBORHOOD**

**POPULATION** | *MORE THAN*  
**65,000** | **40**  
*LANGUAGES*  
**SPOKEN**

**NEARLY** | **More than 300 restaurants,**  
**1,000** | **including Indian, Pakistani,**  
**BUSINESSES** | **Afghan, kosher, Italian, BBQ,**  
**Iraqi and Mediterranean**

*HOME OF THE*  
**DEVON** | *MORE THAN*  
*COMMUNITY* | **25**  
**MARKET** | **BAKERIES**  
**SWEETSHOPS**  
**TEAHOUSES**

Source: West Ridge Chamber of Commerce, [Westridgechamber.org](http://Westridgechamber.org)

It was a very comfortable place to move into, and there haven't been conflicts."

Susan says it is much easier to be a businesswoman in the U.S. than in India. "In India, they don't take you as seriously. You have to be so assertive."

The Patel family is an economic engine on Devon, owning three buildings and running seven businesses on the avenue, including Patel Brothers grocery, with the first store established in 1974 and now expanded to 52 stores in the United States and Canada. The store on Devon is spacious and spotless, filled with such Indian foods and ingredients as gluten-free chapati flour, peanut and sesame chikki, cocktail samosa, jaggery and frozen paneer kulcha.

After tea at Patel Café, a popular spot where cricket fans gather to watch matches and where Susan will soon be general manager, we walk across Devon where she introduces me to her uncle, Babu Patel, president of Sahil who, with his son, CEO Bravesh Patel, oversees the 25-year-old one-stop-shopping destination for anyone planning an Indian wedding where "design consultants help you in selecting the color combination, the patterns, embroidery, cuts, traditional look and fabric."

En route to Babu's upstairs office, we pass strategically lit display rooms, where mannequins





Esther Sabo and husband Menachem of the Tel-Aviv Kosher Bakery

display his latest collection, all handmade in India. There are salwar kameez, churidar suits, kurtis, lehengas and cholis, saris, sherwanis and kurta pajamas. Susan points out a row of vests in the style of the prime minister of India, Narendra Modi, who favors them, making them wildly popular among Indians. Fabrics come from Varanasi (aka Banaras) and Surat, and range from raw silk to Georgette to chiffon. Babu employs a team of designers in India who oversee the work. Manish Malhotra and Vikram Phadnis, two of India's star designers, were launched by Sahil in the U.S.

Babu advertises on the many Indian television stations in the United States, and his customers come from across the Midwest. A bride's dress can cost up to \$10,000; a groom's outfit up to \$3,000. The more handwork, the higher the price. He

tells me that business is booming because of a growing trend.

"Indian women are marrying American men. This intermarriage is happening more and more, and most of the time the couple wants a traditional Indian wedding. They can get everything here. They don't have to go to India anymore." Babu says intermarriages used to be 10 percent of his business. Now they're 70 percent.

In her book, *Namasté America: Indian Immigrants in an American Metropolis*, Padma Rangaswamy traces the first Indian-owned business on Devon to April 6, 1973, when manager Rattan Sharma opened the India Sari Palace. In the 1980s, Rangaswamy writes, as another wave of Indian immigrants came to the United States, Indian merchants saw opportunities to cater to the new arrivals. "First came





Tel-Aviv Kosher Bakery

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the grocery stores and sari shops, then the appliance and video stores, quickly followed by restaurants and banquet halls, and more recently, jewelry shops.” Jewish merchants were pushed further west on the avenues and many closed their doors, a trend that continues today.

Shalom Klein, executive director of the Jewish Community Council of West Rogers Park, acknowledges the loss of many Jewish businesses on Devon but attributes some of that to struggles that small retailers have in general competing with big-box stores and online shopping. “West Rogers Park is a Jewish neighborhood, and I think it will continue to be a Jewish neighborhood for many, many decades to come.” He says Jewish orthodox families are moving into the area, replacing those who, when I lived there, practiced Reformed and Conservative Judaism.

“But the goal is not to go back to the way it was in the 1960s when my father walked Devon Avenue all the way down to Sheridan Avenue and it was only Jewish businesses,” Klein says. “My goal for Devon is to see Jewish businesses operating side by side with Asian, Croatian, Hispanic, Assyrian, African-American — with all the other people that

#### THE FLAVORS AND STYLES OF DEVON AVENUE

**Tel-Aviv Kosher Bakery**  
(773) 764-8877

**Sahil**  
[Saahilexclusive.com](http://Saahilexclusive.com)

**Tiffin**  
[Tiffinchicago.com](http://Tiffinchicago.com)

**Patel Handicrafts**  
[Patelhandicrafts.com](http://Patelhandicrafts.com)

**Patel Brothers Grocery**  
[Patelbros.com](http://Patelbros.com)

**Robert's Fish Market**  
[Robertsfishmarket.com](http://Robertsfishmarket.com)

**Levinson's Bakery**  
(773) 761-3174

**Raj Jewels**  
(773) 465-5755

**Kol Tuv Kosher Foods**  
[Koltuvkosher.com](http://Koltuvkosher.com)

**Croatian Cultural Center of Chicago**  
[Croatianculturalcenterchicago.com](http://Croatianculturalcenterchicago.com)

**Hema's Kitchen**  
(773) 338-1627

call West Rogers Park home. We reside next to each other extremely well. We support each other's businesses, and we will be improving the neighborhood together as well.”

This spirit of cooperation among so many different cultures and faiths is inspiring, and I begin to wonder if Devon holds a greater message for the world at large. Could rye bread, tandoori chicken, masala tea and challah bring people together?

With that in mind, I walk down Devon past portions of the avenue renamed in honor of Golda Meir, Mahatma Gandhi, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and Muhammad Ali Jinnah, and stop in unannounced at the Indo-American Center (IAC). The goal of the Center, established in 1990, is to “respond to the wide range of needs within Chicago's South Asian immigrant population.” That includes English as a Second Language lessons, housing, job counseling, a free lunch program for seniors and help with immigration issues.

I meet Laura Smith, the volunteer literacy coordinator and an English teacher at IAC's literacy department. She sees cross-cultural bridges being built every day as newer immigrants come to West Ridge from Syria, Nepal, Myanmar and Iraq. They bring to the neighborhood all the major religions of the world: Hinduism, Muslim,

Christianity and Judaism.

“I have students from all over, and they have to communicate in English because there is not someone else in their class that speaks their language, so they end up making friends,” Smith says. “I love it here. It's a pleasure to the eyes and a pleasure to the tongue. It really is like taking an international trip without leaving the States.”

**STEPHEN J. LYONS** is a frequent contributor to *American Way*. His new book, *Going Driftless*, a journey into the heart of the Upper Midwest, was published in May.