

# From Buddhism to butter chicken: Ethnically diverse neighbourhoods foster cultural understanding. And they have great restaurants.

**Calgary Herald**

Mon Jan 26 2004

Page: A11

Section: Comment

Byline: Rajan Sawhney

Source: For the Calgary Herald

I was recently asked by a friend how I enjoyed living in an ethnically diverse suburb. I initially laughed because I never pictured Castleridge to be a suburb of Calgary. Certainly, it was on the outskirts of the city about 10 years ago, but the recent development of areas such as Martindale and Saddleridge have made Castleridge almost as close to the inner city as to the outer. The question also triggered childhood memories of growing up in the '70s, when ethnic diversity was not as common in the suburbs as it is today.

I grew up in Rundle in the city's northeast. In the mid-'70s, it was most definitely a suburb of Calgary. We were literally on the edge of the city; there was no LRT and Sunridge Mall was still about five years away. When we moved in, I distinctly remember that our family, of southeast Asian descent, was the only visible minority on the block. There was an Italian family down the road and my soon-to-be-best friend, who was Lebanese, lived several blocks away. There was only a smattering of visible minorities in my school and racism was a much bigger issue in those days than it is now. Compared to the demographic makeup of the city today, this lack of ethnic diversity in the '70s really made things challenging for second-generation immigrant kids.

The point of all this is that suburban Calgary in the '70s was just entering the initial stages of diversity. Since then, there has been a dramatic change in demographics, as illustrated by the rise of the immigrant population in the city overall. According to Citizenship and Immigration Canada, between 1982 and 1991, approximately 145,000 new immigrants settled in Calgary.

Although the annual number of immigrants migrating to the city remained fairly consistent over the years, there has been a shift in their countries of origin. In the early 1980s, a large component of immigrants were of European descent; by 2002, the majority of immigrants in Calgary cited Asia as their country of birth. Today, immigrants comprise one-fifth of the total population.

This shift in demographics has been readily observed in some suburban communities. As would be expected, rising Asian immigrant populations have resulted in an increased demand for goods and services that cater to these communities. Over the years, this demand has precipitated a great deal of commercial development for businesses focusing on the Asian market.

I find this to be a huge advantage. Like many south Asian families, I live in a joint family (an extended family unit that usually includes grandparents).

I have found that living in Castleridge meets the needs of the whole family more closely than any other community. On one hand, we have ready access to Asian markets, multilingual physicians, close proximity to the Sikh temple and access to a well-entrenched community. On the other hand, the close proximity to downtown and Chapters (it's only recently that I was cured of my addiction to tall, skim lattes with extra foam) is also clearly important.

Aside from the convenience of local amenities, living in an ethnically diverse neighbourhood has other advantages. Cultural diversity also fosters cultural sensitivity. In today's shrinking global society, it's important to understand where people come from, what they value and how they see the world. Cultural diversity can open doors to facilitate this understanding and can provide an invaluable education.

To illustrate, I learned more about Mahayana Buddhism from an Indonesian couple I met in Prairie Winds Park than the religious studies course I took in university. I feel that I have also contributed to this learning process. This past spring, I spent a significant amount of time with some neighbours discussing the annual Baisakhi parade hosted by the Sikh community. I also see my eight-year-old daughter expanding her horizons. In the summer, I discovered the reason behind her expanded vocabulary in Punjabi; she was translating for a group of newly arrived immigrant children from Pakistan.

Another, often overlooked, advantage of ethnically diverse neighbourhoods is that they usually have great restaurants. It goes without saying that some of the best ethnic cuisine restaurants are in my neighbourhood. One can easily find popular dishes such as butter chicken and samosas among the many Indian restaurants in my neighbourhood.

Vietnamese and Mediterranean cuisine are also very popular. Interestingly, ethnic cuisine also promotes cultural awareness; there is a considerable body of research that affirms this. People's natural curiosity about food combined with an openness to try new cuisines can actually bridge cultural gaps.

So, how do I like living in an ethnically diverse suburb? I like it very much. I wouldn't quite characterize Castleridge as a suburban oasis, but I have learned a lot over the years from my friends and neighbours. It's been an adventure and I'm proud to be residing in such a vibrant and colourful community.

© 2004 Postmedia Network Inc. All rights reserved.

Illustration:

- Photo: Ted Jacob, Calgary Herald / Rajan Sawhney grew up in Calgary's northeast and enjoys the cultural diversity of living in Castleridge.

Edition: Final

Story Type: Series

Note: A native Calgarian and lifelong resident of the northeast, Rajan Sawhney works in the oilpatch. (This is one of a series of occasional articles on Calgary neighbourhoods.) Calgary Neighbourhoods

Length: 811 words

**PRODUCTION FIELDS**

NDATE: 20040126