

Episode Title: **Maneet Chauhan's Ale and Masala**

Episode Summary: In this week's episode, Sid Evans, Editor-in-Chief of Southern Living Magazine, talks to acclaimed chef and Chopped judge Maneet Chauhan about how she found her calling in Nashville, her upcoming book, and why traveling has been the greatest influence on her expansive culinary career.

Episode Transcript:

(Biscuits and Jam Theme begins - Fiddler's Barn on Epidemic Sound)

Voice Over from SID EVANS: *Welcome to another episode of Biscuits and Jam, from Southern Living. I'm Sid Evans, editor-in-chief of Southern Living Magazine.*

Today's guest says the greatest teacher in her vast culinary career hasn't been a specific book or individual, but the journey itself.

Maneet: I have realized that traveling is the one education that has expanded my palette and my mind the most. What has been fun is that I have realized how different we are as people and how similar we are as people through traveling. Food is that one common language that all of us can speak. And if we take the time to understand it, we can connect as, human beings.

Sid NARRATION: *If you're a fan of the Food Network program Chopped, you know Maneet Chauhan well for being a judge throughout the run of the show. Graduating at the top of her class from India's number one culinary school, she led kitchens in both New York and Chicago, before setting her sights on Nashville, to launch the Morph Hospitality Group with her husband Vivek. Now with four restaurants in Music City -- each delivering different spins on American, Indian and Chinese cuisine -- Maneet is set to release a new book this fall, full of recipes from every corner of her native country.*

On today's program, Maneet details how at an early age, she would assist in cooking not just with her family, but with anyone who would offer.

Maneet: So whenever our family friends would invite us to their house for dinner, they literally would call up my parents and say, "you guys come around at seven and send Maneet at around three so that she can help us cook."

And that I think was my a-ha moment when I realized, that I can do something that I love and people love me for it. That was a no brainer.

Sid NARRATION: *Plus Maneet's obsession with Nashville hot chicken, starting a new Thanksgiving tradition in the south, and much more on today's episode of Biscuits & Jam.*

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Sid: Well, Maneet Chauhan, welcome to Biscuits and Jam.

Maneet: Thank you so much. I'm so excited.

Sid: Maneet, you grew up in India. And I'm wondering if you can tell me a little bit about the home and the city that you grew up in.

Maneet: So, I was born in Northern India, in a state called Punjab and I grew up in Eastern Indiana in a really small town called Ranchi. My dad, he was an engineer, my mom a school teacher. Now the fun part about India is that each and every state, has its own distinct cuisine. So I grew up being this completely obnoxious kid, which I think the only thing which has changed is the kid part of it.

But, um, I would finish dinner at home, you know, and my mom would cook traditional Punjabi food. And then I would go to my neighbors houses either, they were from Bengali, Eastern India or Maharashtra Western India, or, you know, Southern India. And I literally would tell them that my parents haven't fed me.

So can I eat with you guys? And it used to be incredible because I wouldn't be only, sitting with them on the dining table, but. I would go into the kitchen and see them cook. And there were techniques, there were ingredients, there were, you know, produce, which I had never seen in my house. And that's, where my foundation and obsession of food really started.

Sid: So, is it fair to say that the different parts of India are almost like a different country when it comes to the food?

Maneet: You can very easily say that. But it also depends on what the historical, influences have been, like, there is a place in Southern India it's called Pondicherry and it has French influence to it or Goa, which has Portuguese influence. If I spend my entire life trying to delve into Indian food, I probably won't even scratch the surface because there's so many nuances in it, which makes it so exciting.

Sid: So Maneet your, your mom was a high school principal. So was she the, main cook in your family?

Maneet: She was the main cook till the time I started cooking. And then I kind of booted them out of the kitchen. You know, my dad had a scooter, a two-wheeler, and every Sunday I would go with my dad to our local farmer's market. It was a matter of 12, 15 years that we would go and have this, rapport with the local farmers. And, uh, dad would make desserts like ice creams and we didn't have an ice cream churning and apparently we were the ice cream churning. Because in the night he would make it, put it in the freezer, early in the morning on a Sunday, wake us up and cut the ice cream and then put it in a pot. And then with a ladle, he is churning it. But once I took over cooking, um, I would not have them get into the kitchen. And then when I was leaving for my undergrad, my dad would tell me, 'so who's going to cook for me now?' And mom is like, 'I'll tell you who will cook for you.'

Sid: So you really kinda took over at a pretty early age. Huh?

Maneet: Yeah, I think sixth or seventh grade. It was.

Sid: Wow

Maneet: Yeah. And they were like 'study,' and I'm like, 'no, I cook instead.'

Sid: So, did you have a few go-to dishes that were some of your favorites to make early on?

Maneet: Yes. I was always obsessed with desserts. I think the reason why I was obsessed with desserts was because what I would see as pastries and cakes weren't in books, weren't available in India.

So I wanted to learn something which was different. And then I came here, and saw the dismal state of affair of Indian food and that's where I made the switch. Like I always say that's when I went into the dark side, got into the savory kitchen.

(Instrumental music break of Biscuits and Jam theme -- :10 fade in/fade out)

Sid: So what about the holidays in your house? Did you celebrate a lot of the traditional Indian holidays? And was that a big thing for your family?

Maneet: Yes. I mean, holidays in India they are huge. I mean, think of Diwali, which is our festival of lights. It's the Indian new year's. And, uh, you know, you go out and each and every house has lights all over it. so they're beautiful, but most of the festivals are also celebrated with traditional food. It's all about indulgence, right? So there's lot of sweets, lot of desserts.

Then one of my favorite festivals is Holi, which is the festival of colors. And we go ahead and throw colored powders on people, colored water on people. It's so much fun. And again, it also centers around food and drinks and it's amazing.

Sid: So Maneet. When did you first realize that you wanted to go to culinary school and really make this a serious thing?

Maneet: When I was in school, and everybody started knowing my obsession with cooking and food. So whenever our family friends would invite us to their house for dinner, they would call up my parents and say, you guys come around at seven and send Maneet at around three so that she can help us cook.

And I started realizing what a great connector food was. And then along the way, my oldest sister, when she went to do her undergrad, I would go to visit her and I would take food. And soon I realized I was the most popular kid on campus and I didn't even go to school there.

And that I think was my aha moment when I realized, that I can do something that I love and people love me for it. That was a no brainer. But again, I grew up in a community where each and every kid was starting to be a doctor or an engineer. And if you're really thinking outside the box maybe an accountant.

And over here, I am thinking of becoming a chef, which was barely acceptable in India at that time. Uh, and on top of that being a girl and a chef, "Oh my God. Like what's going on?" But, My parents were very, very supportive. They were like, do whatever you want to do, but make sure you're the best at it.

Sid: So when it came to, deciding to move to the United States and go to culinary school over here. That must've been a difficult decision for you?

Maneet: Not really, because in my final year, when I did my undergrad in India, again, I only applied to three of the top, uh, hotel administration schools in India because exclusive culinary schools, per se, at that time in India where we're just not there. And in my final year I asked my chef structure, which was the best Institute in the world to go to. And without even batting an eyelid he said the CIA, The Culinary Institute of America. So that was it. It was slightly easier for me because my sister was already, here to do her, um, postgrad in, um, at IU in Bloomington.

So she was already here. So I think it was easier for me than it was for her, because I kind of already had a support system, who could tell me that 'don't do this' and 'these other words that you cannot use over here.' So I had, you know, 'this is a dime, this is a nickel.' So, it was really, easier for me.

Sid: She had sort of paved the way for you.

Maneet: She did. Yes.

Sid: Yeah. I want to jump to Nashville. Um, so you've spent some time in New York and Chicago. Is that right?

Maneet: That's right.

Sid: And, um, you've been living in Nashville now for what? Six years now?

Maneet: Yes.

Sid: Uh, I've talked to a lot of musicians on this podcast about driving to Nashville, with dreams of making it big, you know, I'm wondering what was that first visit like for you.

Maneet: I had done Iron Chef, Next Iron Chef, Chopped had just taken off. I had just had my daughter. And at that time, I started thinking about wanting to do something of my own because till that time I had been working, you know, for other people. And, I started getting these phone calls like, hi, would you like to open a place in Seattle?

Would you like to open a place in San Francisco? In New York? In Chicago? The obvious places, right? And in between I get a call that, 'Hey, would you like to open something in Nashville?' And I turned to my husband, Vivek, we are business partners and our first reaction was "who the beep goes to Nashville" because we had never visited here, right?

But both of us, we've always been Wanderers. We explore each and every opportunity that comes our way. So we always say that it was love at first landing in Nashville, because as soon as we landed, not only did we fall in love with how beautiful the city and the area is, or how welcoming the people are.

But we also fell in love with the opportunity that the city afforded us. Right. Because in New York. Everybody's a celebrity chef. There is only so far you can, you can take your celebrity over there, over here. There wasn't anything like what we wanted to do in terms of Chauhan.

It was a unique concept and we thought that it would do very well, but the plan was to open the place and commute from New York because Vivek had businesses in New York. And the six month project took close to a year and a half. And, along the way we found out we were expecting baby number two.

Sid: Wow.

Maneet: That's fine!

Sid: Got a lot going on.

Maneet: Lot going on! Our idea was that we will open the restaurant November 18. Uh, work for, one or two months and then the baby was due-in February, March. Um, as luck would have it when I was doing the media dinner on 17th of November, my contractions started. And our baby was born the morning of November 18th and the restaurant opened on the evening of November 18. So Vivek and I, we always joke that we had twins on November 18th. Of course, our son was three months preemie.

We weren't there at the opening of my first restaurant and we were living in a hotel with a three year old. I mean, it was drama and chaos all over. And what we decided at that time was that if our son who by the way we named Karma -- you need to have a sense of humor with, you know, all of this is happening -- and we decided that if he's so adamant in becoming a Nashvillian who are we to stop it?

And the kids have the most charming manners ever. So I think it is like the best of all the worlds.

Sid: So I'm wondering if you feel like there are similarities between southern culture and Indian culture.

Maneet: Absolutely. I think there is so much, and that's why I feel so at home, in a, you know, in the South, in Nashville. There is formality in the sense of giving respect. But there isn't that distance, right? The way the entire community embraced us, rallied around us. And not for a second did we feel that we did not belong? I think that was what cemented our entire love and dedication to Nashville. The people in Nashville made us realize that we were home.

Sid: I love hearing that and you know, my wife's from Nashville, so we spend a lot of time up there and we just love it.

Maneet: Oh my God. It is a very special place.

(Instrumental music break of Biscuits and Jam theme -- fade in/fade out)

SID NARRATION: *Stay tuned for more with Maneet Chauhan, after the break.*

BREAK

(Instrumental music break of Biscuits and Jam theme -- fade in/fade out)

SID NARRATION: *Welcome back to Biscuits & Jam, from Southern Living. I'm Sid Evans, and we're talking with Chopped judge and Nashville chef Maneet Chauhan.*

Sid: So tell me about that first restaurant. Chauhan Ale And Masala House. Am I saying that right?

Maneet: Absolutely.

Sid: How did you come up with the concept? I mean, I don't know of a lot of other ale and masala houses.

Maneet: We first started thinking of, what are all the problems or the miss, uh, the conceptions that people have about Indian food, right? One of the first is \$8.95 all you can eat greasy buffet. Okay? We started with a list of don'ts, right? And then we started figuring out that it's Nashville. There hasn't been anything like what we have done, how do we make it approachable? And then the more time I spent in Nashville, I started realizing there is a lot of commonality between Southern food and Indian food. Right? And we started playing off that, Hot chicken, right. And we call it on our menu. Chauhan's ode to Nashville, Chauhan's hot chicken. So we do a hot chicken pakora. Pakora is an Indian fritter. Um, black eyed peas. On Sundays, mom used to make that at least once a month, it would take forever.

So that got on the menu. Ingredients like collard greens. We would put it in our saag. So we wanted to pay homage to where we are. That's Nashville, and also connected to our roots, which is India. And then when we were looking at a beverage program, we started thinking what wines pair with Indian food.

Because as soon as you start thinking of beverage and food pairing, you think of wine. And Vivek and I we're like, but growing up, our uncles, dads, they were all having beers. IPA came about because of India, you know, beers are so amazing with Indian food. And then we started thinking about, you know, giving it a kind of a pub-ish, uh, you know, feel and we wanted it not to be stuffy upscale. We wanted it to be inviting that anybody could come. It's approachable, even if you don't know Indian food, and then you can just come for an ale, just come for a drink and then maybe, see some nachos which are Indian inspired. And then we are hooking people up one dish at a time, and I think that's been very successful. So that was the idea behind it.

Sid: It sounds like it's infused with Southern hospitality in other words, you know?

Maneet: Absolutely. I mean, you're in the South, I mean, we wouldn't have been able to be in operation for six months if that wasn't the, the core of our business, the essence of our business, the hospitality.

Sid: So you have four restaurants now, can you just give me a quick tour of the, the other three?

Maneet: Absolutely. So we have, Mockingbird. Mockingbird is our, uh, American diner concept. Fun, fun place to be at. Uh, then we have Tansuö, which is our Chinese concept.

Absolutely gorgeous. Beautiful, gorgeous place. And then we have Chaatable, which is our newest, entry to the Morph family, which is our hospitality company.

And Chaatable, uh, is our street Indian concepts. Um, 'chaat' translated from Hindi means to lick. So it's a very lickable concept and it's like, it's a sensory overload. It's like going to India, we threw colors on each and every wall that we found and we were almost afraid that it might be too garish. But hey, it works. It's a sensory overload.

Sid: So Maneet, you've kind of become famous for some of your Thanksgiving feasts at, particularly at Chauhan, Ale Masala House. So, how did that get to be such a big thing?

Maneet: So, what I love about Thanksgiving is that feeling of togetherness. Like, I remember my first Thanksgiving. Everybody had gone home. I couldn't travel home because home was India. So, one of the instructors invited me to their house for Thanksgiving.

And what I fell in love about Thanksgiving was that sense of togetherness. And I was so curious about everything on the table, right from the Turkey to the green bean casserole, to the cranberry sauce. And while I'm seeing this entire table, I'm just translating it in my mind as to when I have my Thanksgiving gatherings with my family, what would I do?

We would do tandoori chicken, tandoori Turkey kebabs, right? And the stuffing is rice and lentils, biryani stuffing. There is a green bean poriyal, there is cranberry chutney. There is a sweet potato subzi so basically everything that you find on a Thanksgiving table.

I presented that, but with an Indian flair and with an Indian twist. And the first year we decided that we will open for Thanksgiving because to me, I kept on thinking about people like me, who couldn't travel back home. Uh, you know, at least get, give them something. And even if you come to a restaurant it becomes a sense of belonging, right?

And that ended up being our busiest day. And so now we continue it every year. We, just go ahead and we open at 12, we do 12 to 8 and we have these large platters, which we call talys, which people order. And inevitably at five o'clock. We are running around like, a Turkey without a head -- I'm just kidding.

Uh, because we are running low on something because we anticipated that we were going to be busy. But every year it keeps on, becoming busier and busier, which is a great problem to have.

Sid: Oh, it sounds so great. Do you ever get a big country artists coming into the restaurants? Surely you do.

Maneet: We do, uh, we've had like Kelly Clarkson and Taylor Swift, but there are so many times that I'm in the kitchen and you know, the servers come running in 'chef, chef, who -- guess who's outside.' I'm like, 'who?' And then they say, I'm like, 'ahh.' Then I'm on my phone like Googling. But that's what I love about Nashville. I remember in New York, anybody who was somebody would come to the restaurant and it would be such a different atmosphere over here. You know, it's, it's casual. People are like, we want to come out and dine. We want

to enjoy the place and, and that's it. It doesn't have to be stuffy. It doesn't have to be over the top. And that's what makes Nashville so special.

(Instrumental music break of Biscuits and Jam theme -- :10 fade in/fade out)

Sid: I want to ask you a personal question. So tell me about your relationship with hot chicken.

Maneet: Huh? I love hot chicken! I mean, sorry. Let me rephrase that. I love a good hot chicken, right?

Uh, I have become very Nashvillian in the aspect that it needs to be good. It needs to have all the criteria. It just cannot be hot. It needs to have other flavorings to it. It needs to be crunchy and crispy and it needs to be succulent and moist inside, not over cooked. So I think I've become a hot chicken elitist right now, but Hey, it's okay. It's all worth it.

Sid: Well, I figured, you had a connection with it because it seems like, with all the spice, it has a lot of things in common with, with great Indian food when it's done right, of course.

So Maneet, this has been a tough time for restaurants, and it's a very tough time for the hospitality industry. And I know that it's been a tough time for you and your husband, Vivek. You've been through layoffs, the uncertainty, the pain of all this. And I'm just wondering what keeps you going and what do you think the future of restaurants can look like?

Maneet: I think what keeps us going. Is the motivation that we need to get each and every person that we had to lay off, this was a team of 250 people that we spent five years making that family.

And the fact that in just one afternoon, we had to tell them that we had to lay them off was, uh, I think that's the one thing which has scarred us the most.

After that, I think we just kept on pushing ourselves that let's figure out how we are going to make all of these concepts survive. Because if these concepts survive, then we are in the position to get everybody back. Because it is family. As soon as all of this happened and we just opened our pantries, our refrigerators just made sure that none of our team members, would go hungry.

We told them that if they, I needed anything to just give us a call. Then we started working with a lot of our, vendors because they had so much produce. Nobody was taking it and that would go bad. And, in our parking lot, there was a day that we got 550 cases of produce.

And we just told everybody in the hospitality industry, like come over, help yourself, just make sure that you guys are not food insecure. We keep on pushing ourselves, uh, coming up with. Creative solutions. Some of them work, some of them don't, but we don't stop because there are so many people who are relying on us and we owe it to them to keep moving.

Sid: And you've been raising some money too, for the hospitality industry.

Maneet: Yes.

Sid: Can you tell me a little bit about that.

Maneet: So, um, we've got a brewery in Murfreesboro, which is called Hop Springs. And, um, I think the brewery was one of the few businesses, which actually, instead of taking a dive. It went up the other way because.

People wanted beer, they are drinking beer. People would be driving all the way from Nashville to pick up cases. And a portion of that went to Hospitality Strong, which is an initiative that we have started to help hospitality industry workers, anybody who needs help, we are they're in whatever form that we can do. So that is something that we are doing. Working towards making sure if anybody needs help. We are there .

Sid: Wow, yeah. Um, I applaud your efforts on that front. I know so many people are struggling right now. Um, so Maneet, there is this incredibly strong community of Indian chefs in the South. Um, you know, I spoke to Cheetie Kumar a couple months ago for this podcast. Um, there's Vishwesh Bhatt in Oxford and Meherwan Irani in Asheville, and so many others. And I'm wondering. ~~Um~~, have you gotten to know them well as a community? And what has that meant to you?

Maneet: Oh my God. Uh, absolutely, Vishwesh, and Meherwan they started. Something which is called Brown in the South. Right. And we've been doing these fundraisers. And we love doing it because, there is a little bit of cheekiness in the Brown and the South. Like, you know, this, this is who we are. But the fact that, so many, South Asian chefs had actually made such an incredible impact in the South, right?

It speaks volumes. They are family. We call it our, our Southern family. Every time we meet, we make it a point that we meet a day before the event, if we are in Atlanta or in, Raleigh or Nashville, the idea is that the night before we'll have blasting Bollywood music going on, all of us are eating, drinking.

It's just so much fun. So that connection is so valuable. Yeah. I just love and adore them.

Sid: So Maneet, you have a book coming out. Uh, I think it's October 6th called 'Chaats.'

Maneet: Yes.

Sid: *'Recipes From The Kitchens, Markets and Railways of India.'* So I hear you did a lot of traveling and eating for this book. Tell me about that.

Maneet: It was a tough, tough, tough, tough job. Like eating like 600 dishes in six days. When I think of food memories to me, one of the most impactful memories was when we would take trains to go to our grandparents houses. As my kid says, you know, they say that I was in the dark ages. 'Really? You had to take trains?' So, but these trains were unlike the trains here. The windows were open, the doors are open. It would take three days, two nights, and it would stop at each and every small station.

And at these stations, the local vendors would come to sell their wheres or foods. And I would look forward to each of the stations based on what I'm going to eat there. Because people ask me, what is Indian cuisine? I'm like, I can't tell you. It's so vast. And chaats are

pretty much Indian street foods, uh, which are like, combination of different elements of different textures of different flavors and they are absolutely addictive.

and as time goes on, I realize how much these street vendors or these railway vendors have formed my foundation as a chef. Because whenever I'm making a dish, I'm always thinking of what is the fresh component on it? What is the textural element in it? What is the sweet, what is the tart, what is the savory, what is the hot?

Last year, when we could travel, my coauthor, Jody Eddy, and our photographer, Linda Zoa. We traveled to India.

And we came back with at least 400 different recipes. And it's a very organic book. It flows very well. It's beautiful. It's colorful. It's a sensory overload and there are a lot of personal stories of me growing up as a kid, how my family, resulted in me being the chef I am. So it's, it's, I think it gets very heartwarming and it's very personal and it's got beautiful photographs and delicious recipes.

(Instrumental music break of Biscuits and Jam theme -- :10 fade in/fade out)

Sid: So Maneet, what do you say to people who are intimidated by cooking Indian food?

Maneet: Start with baby steps. If I have to do a new cuisine, I would be intimidated, but then I would do my research. I would get the ingredients and start with the basics. But the one thing I always tell people is that it is great to follow recipes. The first time you do it, or the second time you do it. The third time? Make that recipe your own and put your own signature on it because there might be an ingredient that when you taste this, say that, Oh my God, if I put the trail mix that I make in this chaat, it would be fantastic.

Right. And then you have like a Southern chaat, right or the barbecue chicken that I make is out of this world. Now, how can I make a chaat out of it? So to me, start off with the basics. There are a couple of, um, spices, know them, make them your friends, and then I promise you Indian food can be one of the most addictive cooking's that you can take up and you'll find yourself sneaking chaat masala and everything.

Sid: So Maneet, I want to talk a little bit about the, just the next generation. So, you know, we did a story on you and your daughter Shagun. Am I saying that right? A few months ago, and I'm just wondering, does she love to cook like her mom?

Maneet: She does, but I think what she loves more is the fact that she's on some sort of media be it TV or, you know. Because even when she is cooking when there is no phone or camera around, she still acts like she is. She's like, 'now I am going to take the eggs and I'm going to do this.' But, what I love about her is that she's a very adventurous eater. We've, it was her birthday last month. And we went to Chattanooga and I'm like, 'what do you want to have for dinner?' And she's like 'octopus.' And I'm like, 'I love you girl. '

Sid: I am doing something right.

Maneet: So I am doing something right. So we do all of these chaat parties and she gets so involved in it and she builds all of these flavors. Um, so it's, yeah, it's a lot of fun, uh, that in some way I'm passing on the tradition of cooking to her.

Sid: And, uh, I hear your husband's a pretty good cook, uh, too, is he got a dish that he's kind of famous for around the house?

Maneet: Uh, Vivek's chicken Curry and egg Curry is out of this world. Between you and me, I think he, he has a lot more patients when it's cooking. Because to me it's a profession, so I'm like, boom, boom, boom. Let's get it done. When he starts, he's like, 'I'll make dinner.' I'm like, 'okay, I'll have it for lunch tomorrow.' He takes so much, pain, love, care time in cooking and you can taste it in each and every bite, but, that is something that I really crave.

Sid: So Maneet, what are you really looking forward to the most? When we get through,, all of this?

Maneet: What I'm looking forward to the most is traveling because I have realized that traveling is the one education that has expanded my palette and my mind the most. What has been fun is that I have realized how different we are as people and how similar we are as people through traveling.

I had the opportunity to go to Peru And I decided to walk into the local market and I can't speak Spanish, the vendors over there, they couldn't speak English. So, Vivek, found me half an hour later, I was selling potatoes with this old grandma.

And I don't know how it happened. I still don't. But the fact was that she was making some croquettes, which looked like aloo tikkis which are Indian. And I just sat with her and started, making these with her. And it just made me realize that food is that one common language that all of us can speak.

BEGIN BISCUITS THEME MUSIC

And if we take the time to understand it, we can connect as, human beings. And that I think is such a powerful lesson, which I just -- I want to continue that by traveling.

Sid: Well, we all need some more of that right now.

Maneet: Oh yes, we do. Absolutely.

Sid: Well, Maneet Chauhan, it's been such a privilege to have you on Biscuits and Jam.

Maneet: Oh my God. Thank you so much. This was so much fun.

Sid NARRATION: *Thanks for listening to my conversation with Maneet Chauhan. Visit MorphHospitality.com to learn more about Maneet's restaurants, follow her on Instagram, and look for Maneet's new book *Chaat: Recipes from the Kitchens, Markets and Railways of India* later this fall.*

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