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Chefs turn up heat on King's estate to save oldest Indian

Veeraswamy has been asked to leave its home of almost a century to make way for offices, writes Jessica Newman

Some of Britain's best known chefs are whipping up a veritable storm over plans by the King's property company to convert the home of the country's oldest Indian restaurant into offices.

Raymond Blanc, Michel Roux Jr and Michael Caines are among chefs calling on the Crown Estate to engage in meaningful dialogue and act responsibly to save Veeraswamy, the Michelin starred-restaurant in London's Regent Street, that has been serving royals, celebrities and politicians for almost a century.

Veeraswamy, which has been based in Victory House since 1926, is under threat of closure owing to the property's landlord wanting to take the building back. The Crown Estate is owned by the

monarch "in right of the Crown". This means that while the King owns the estate during his reign, it is not his private property and he does not manage or make decisions about its assets. The estate pays its profits to the Treasury, which in turn gives a percentage to the royal family in the form of a sovereign grant to fund the King's official duties and the maintenance of occupied royal palaces.

The Crown Estate management said last summer that it would not renew Veeraswamy's lease because it wanted to extend the ground floor reception area for the offices on the building's upper floors.

In an open letter to The Times, the chefs said that this "would represent a profound loss, both for London's restaurant scene and for our tourism economy".

The signatories also include Richard Corrigan, who runs Bentley's Oyster Bar & Grill and the Portrait Restaurant at the National Portrait Gallery, Cyrus Todiwala, Anthony Demetre, Tom Aikens, Phil Howard and Ben Murphy.

They want the restaurant's future to be secured "in its rightful home". They write that it is "an enduring emblem of London's cultural and gastronomic strength... Veeraswamy is an icon of national culinary history".

Veeraswamy is one of Regent Street's oldest occupants, together with Hamleys, the toy shop, and Café Royal. Its high-profile guests have included Charlie Chaplin, Princess Anne, Mahatma Gandhi and King Abdullah of Jordan. It is owned by MW Eat, which also runs a handful of other Indian restaurants including Chutney Mary.

The Crown Estate said: "We need to carry out a compre-

Veeraswamy and its chefs in 1927. Its campaign to stay in Regent Street is backed by Michel Roux Jr and Raymond Blanc



hensive refurbishment to ensure the building meets modern standards and is brought back into full use.

"We understand how challenging this is for MW Eat. Our focus remains on working with all parties and has included offering to help find new premises on our portfolio so that they can continue to be in the West End, as well as financial compensation."

Due to the legal action, Veeraswamy, whose lease expired at the end of June, will continue to trade at the site until a hearing, which is set to be held next spring or early summer. Because it is a protected tenancy, which gives long-term tenants enhanced rights, if the court finds favour of Veeraswamy it would effectively allow the restaurant to extend its lease for another 14 years.

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Letters to the Editor

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Culinary landmark

Sir, As longstanding members of the British restaurant and hospitality industry we are dismayed by the potential closure by the Crown Estates of Veeraswamy, the oldest Indian restaurant outside India. For nearly 100 years, Veeraswamy has stood on Regent Street, an enduring emblem of London's cultural and gastronomic strength. It is not merely a Michelin-starred restaurant but an institution, training chefs, inspiring innovation and generating employment, as well as inspiring joy among its customers. Veeraswamy is an icon of national culinary history, and to transform it into offices would represent a profound loss, both for London's restaurant scene and for our tourism economy. We urge the Crown Estate to act as a responsible landlord and engage in meaningful dialogue to secure Veeraswamy's future at its rightful home in Victory House.

**Michael Roux Jr, Cyrus Todiwala,
Richard Corrigan, Michael Caines,
Anthony Demetre, Tom Aikens,
Raymond Blanc, Phil Howard, Ben
Murphy, Fay Maschler, Jodi Hinds**