

RESTAURANTS • Charlotte Ivers

Please don't let them take away Britain's first posh curry house



VEERASWAMY MAYFAIR



Whenever I welcome visitors from the land of our imperial overlords, the USA, they have no interest in my well-rehearsed directions to Buckingham Palace or my equally well-worn warnings about Madame Tussauds. What they always want to know is: where to go for a great Indian?

Indian food in Britain is a unique beast: traditional south Asian cooking merged with British tastes and ingredients. From chicken tikka masala to the Birmingham balti, no other country — least of all India — does it the way we do. Even as fashions have embraced authenticity, you can still see unmistakably British notes in our finest restaurants — bacon naan at Dishoom, wild venison biryani at Gymkhana.

Pleasingly, those two greats are now making their way to the US, along with Ambassador's Clubhouse, another restaurant from the owners of Gymkhana: three siblings from Finchley, north London. No more must we endure slander from the Yanks, hopped up on corn syrup, about the blandness of our food.

The history of all these places starts with Veeraswamy. Of course there had been Indian restaurants in Britain well before it arrived way back in 1926, but



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Veeraswamy — opened by the great-grandson of a general of the East India Company and a Mughal princess — is broadly considered to be the first high-end Indian restaurant in Britain.

And now we might be about to lose it (of which more later). But first, lunch. Take a rather unglamorous lift up from the street and arrive in a room full of late-Empire chintz, chandeliers on low ceilings and real silver cutlery. Waiters speak in hushed tones, cleaning crumbs from our white tablecloth with the formal

precision of funeral directors.

"This is Oslo Court for rich Indians," my guest suggests. He's right. It feels as if it has been passed down through the generations — a place for high days and holidays, your daughter's engagement or your father's wake. I get the sense newcomers are rare. I imagine the maître d' looking in confusion at the reservations book. "Ivers... Ivers... Didn't we have her grandfather in once?"

My voice instinctively going down by several decibels and up

by several social classes, we order the tasting menu, which at £90 plus 15 per cent service is not cheap. After a fat tandoori prawn and a murg hazrat mahal (a delicately spiced, mildly overcooked piece of chicken), four curries arrive in polished silverware. The lobster malabar is delightfully delicate: tender (and generous) hunks of lobster in a sauce not far from a classic French bisque. Chicken makhani masala is also a little overcooked, whereas the lamb rogan josh falls apart perfectly on our spoons.

In each case the spice is almost homeopathic. In 1926 no doubt the palate of an honest Englishman was unaccustomed to fiery heat. In my heart it rather feels as if Veeraswamy has not changed its recipes since. The final curry — pineapple in a sweet yellow sauce — would be at home as the dessert in any mid-century boarding school refectory. Our actual dessert — chocolate ganache — tastes remarkably like Penguin biscuits.

Yet I'm perfectly content. Modern people that we are, we often confuse overpowering spice with authenticity. Regardless, Veeraswamy feels specifically British — a relic from a Britain that no longer exists. Perhaps from one that never did, apart from in rooms like this.

And this room too may soon no longer exist. The building's owner, the Crown Estate, wants the entrance back to do maintenance work, meaning the restaurant either has to close or leave. The owners have a petition online calling on the King to intercede. As I write, it has more than 17,000 signatures. Consider adding yours. You may never go to Veeraswamy. In fact, I'm not necessarily sure I'd suggest you do. If you are used to modern dining, this place will feel odd in ways both tangible and intangible. But some things matter, in ways that are equally intangible — history, tradition, nostalgia, belonging. We should fight for Veeraswamy. It's unique places like this that bring visitors to our country — and keep them coming back ■
Victory House, 99 Regent Street, London W1B 4RS; veeraswamy.com

THE DAMAGE

Tasting menu — £90 per person	
Tandoori green prawn	
Murg hazrat mahal	
Lobster malabar	
Chicken makhani masala	
Champaran rogan josh	
Fresh pineapple curry	
Chocolate ganache	
Naan and rice	
2 x pear bellini	£36
2 x Rhino IPA	£19.50

Subtotal	£235.50
Service charge (15%)	£35.32
Total (for two)	£270.82