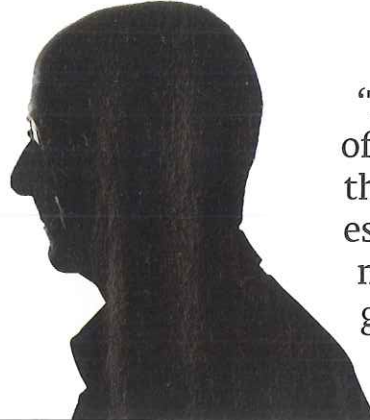


# Nicholas Lander



'The reincarnation of Chutney Mary in this space, once the esteemed Prunier's, may be Mathrani's greatest challenge'

## The warmth of India

### Chutney Mary, London

I ought to have known better than to stop right in the middle of the dining room at Chutney Mary, the Indian restaurant that has just moved from its longtime Chelsea home into St James's Street. Within seconds, a human traffic jam comprising a maître d', several hungry customers and waiters carrying trays of food had backed up behind me.

It was not entirely my fault. I was talking with our guest, a former high commissioner for India, and as we crossed paths with restaurateur Ranjit Mathrani, each recognised the other and stopped. As we are all of an age when our memories require additional hard drive space to work swiftly, it took a few seconds for them to realise that they had met during their careers in Delhi, where Mathrani once worked as a merchant banker.

For the past 25 years Mathrani, with his wife Namita and sister-in-law Camellia Punjabi, has built up an Indian restaurant empire in London. Alongside Chutney Mary they run Veeraswamy, off Regent Street, and the more expensive Amaya in Knightsbridge. In the middle they have created Masala Grill in the space Chutney Mary used to occupy, while several branches of Masala Zone represent their most affordable offer.

Despite all this experience, the reincarnation of Chutney Mary in this space, once the esteemed Prunier's but for several years now an unsuccessful setting for Marco Pierre White, may prove to be Mathrani's greatest challenge.

Mathrani was quick to admit that at 72 he had just done something that he would advise any restaurateur half his age never even to contemplate. "We have just opened two restaurants at the same time," he explained, his face



The new home of Chutney Mary; (below) nimbu tart

#### CHUTNEY MARY

73 St James's Street  
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chutneymary.com  
Closed Sundays



almost draining of colour, "and one, I realise now, is more than enough. They are like children on which one needs to lavish huge amounts of time and love equally."

Mathrani was on the lookout for a new home for Chutney Mary when his agent rang him one Monday morning to tell him that this site was available; the deal was signed within the week. The building's charms are obvious. It is a large corner site in a part of town increasingly popular with wealthy Indians and not that far from Gymkhana, the Indian restaurant that has made such a name for itself in Albemarle Street. And as it's long been occupied by restaurants, the building has the requisite infrastructure in place.

But it is made up of two large rooms that do not lend themselves easily to how we enjoy restaurants today. The first room is light and by far the more inviting of the two, a

cocktail bar in the evening and a setting for more casual lunchtime food and afternoon tea by day. The dining room, down a small flight of stairs, is the darker, less exciting room; it has to remain the principal eating area because of its connection, via dumbwaiter, to the basement kitchen (there are also a couple of good-sized private dining rooms). By throwing a lot of colour at this space, the warmth of India has been replicated. But a low ceiling and the hard surfaces of the wooden dining tables not only made discussion around the table difficult but also resulted in something I had never witnessed before – the maître d' having to bend down to make sure he had heard the order properly.

Some pleasures that I closely associate with India – heat, the aroma of ground spices, those overtones of dry, fragrant curry – were present in three of our four first courses: a guinea fowl kebab, squid bhajias and fried Bengal prawns to be dipped in a spicy sauce. But the most impressive dish was the most restrained, an elegant rendition of Cornish crab, flaked and served with garlic butter in a shallow china bowl.

Our main courses – quail mussalam, tandoori prawns with turmeric and curry leaf, and a vast duck breast roasted with apricot, jiggery, chilli and vinegar – were far more powerful than the first courses. Just as impressive was a kid gosht biryani with saffron served in a copper dish, one of those serving vessels that, as it develops a patina with age, imparts greater flavour. A nimbu (lime) tart provided the cool finale; a salted caramel kulfi considerable sweetness; and a bottle of Palacios 2012 Petalos Bierzo (£52) the liquid refreshment. **FT**

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