

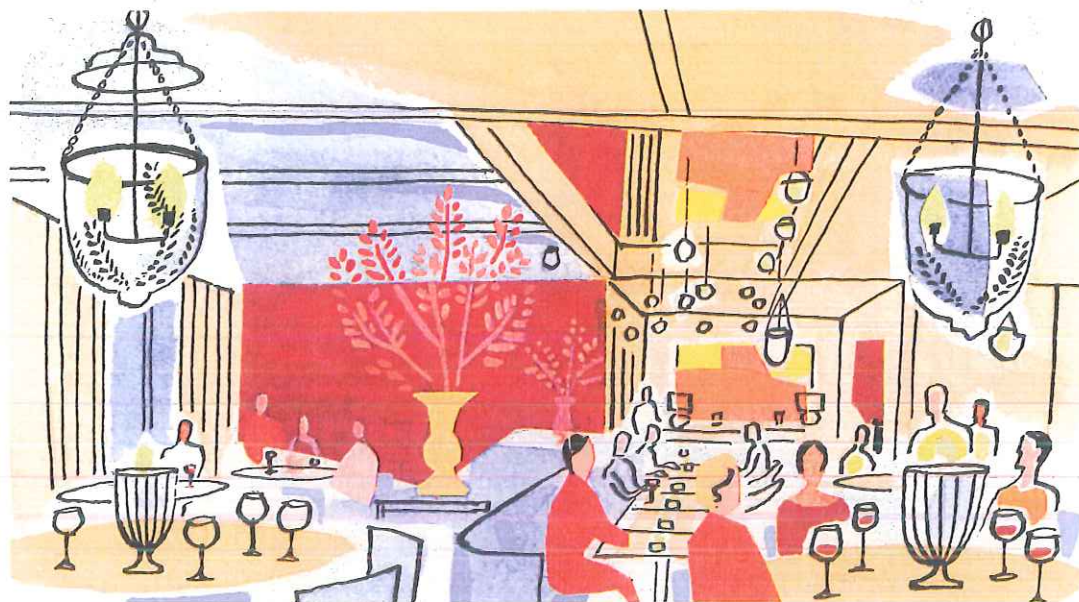
Table Talk

Chutney Mary
St James's Street
London SW1

ATMOSPHERE ★★★★★
FOOD ★★★★★



AA GILL



What, pray, is the defining distinction between a pickle, a relish and a chutney? I can't discover or even invent one. You can get yourself into a pickle. You can relish a thing. But chutney isn't a verb or an adjective. Maybe we should make one up. "He was all over me like chutney, officer." "Cat got your chutney?" "It's the dog's chutnies." "One chutney doesn't make a summer." "It's a red card, he was chutnied."

Coincidentally, these are three words that are equally delicious to say. They are a trio of the most gobtastic words in all gastronomy. There is, of course, Chutney Mary, a sniggering, dismissively racist term for mixed-race Anglo-Indian women during the Raj. At this moment of hypersensitivity about the naming of everything and everyone who feels degraded or marginalised, it says something for the good nature of Indians and their forgiving relationship with us that nobody complains about this as a name for a restaurant. You can't imagine a Latin-American diner called Mestizo Molly's or New Lato Monica's, or a Vietnamese takeaway called Budai Barry's.

Chutney Mary has been a staple of the Fulham end of the King's Road for years: a basement with a tree growing through it that has a sentimentally loyal following. Now it's picked up its poppadom and moved east to St James's, leaving behind an incarnation called Masala Grill, owned and run by the same company. I'm not entirely sure why it was thought efficacious to move the name to St James's, but it has. And now it sits among all those hideous men-only clubs, with the smug, braying sons of Empire, who would eagerly take Asian

girls as mistresses, then snigger at the result as being chichi or Chutney Mary. There is a pleasing mockery in having this derogatory name sit among the purple-jowled squiffy denizens of Boodle's, White's and Pratt's.

The restaurant is set in a room vacated by Marco Pierre White. It was once the most prestigious and famous West End restaurant, Prunier's. It is, by far and away, the nicest dining room in St James's. Its bar serves Indian street food and cocktails, and behind it, a comfortable, modern and elegant dining room is blissfully free of the tired and threadbare clichés of Anglo-Indian restaurants: the simpering nostalgia of colonialism and the tropes of Indian culture, where Bollywood and Hinduism are interchangeable decorative motifs.

Whenever you travel to Mumbai or Delhi, or to any other Indian city, it's always a shock to see how much more cosmopolitan and modern Indian restaurants in India are than Indian restaurants in London. Chutney Mary is owned by the Panjabi sisters, who are based here and in Mumbai, and are responsible for bringing the very best subcontinental food to London — from the Masala Zone chain to Veeraswamy and Amaya.

We started with a collection of chaat (small plates and grills), including a Cornish crab in butter that

"The owner, Camellia Punjabi, is a culinary Clouseau. This restaurant is a testament to a lifetime of forensic appetite and experience"

FROM THE MENU

STARTERS

Baked venison samosa with tamarind and date chutney
£11

Afghan chicken tikka with fennel, cardamom and Himalayan mint
£8.50

MAINS

Calcutta wild prawn curry
£25

Butter chicken methi masala
£18.50

SIDES

Puneri aloo
£5.50

DESSERTS

Salted caramel kulfi
£6.50

for two, inc 12.5% service: £84.40

is reminiscent of the star dish from the original Trishna restaurant. There was venison samosa with tamarind and date chutney; Afghan chicken wings with fennel, cardamom and Himalayan mint (which is a small bush I can't find any other culinary reference for, but turned out to be perfectly edible); and lamb chops with ginger, cinnamon and chilli. The menu is not as exhaustingly repetitious as you'd expect to find, nor as predictable.

A lot of the main courses and starters from Balti houses are missing, and you can be grateful for that because what's left is really interesting: regional and varied dishes that use a brilliant cornucopia of masalas, seasonings and outré ingredients. The spicing is subtle and assured. We had a wild prawn curry that originated in Calcutta, made from coconut and red chilli that is softened to being quite mild, and a butter chicken made with thigh meat, strong-flavoured fenugreek and reduced tomato.

The Hyderabad lamb shank was lustrous. Hyderabad is famous for slow cooking and the sophistication of its spicing; it was one of the richest Mogul cities, but also absorbed the older Hindu tradition.

We had a biryani made with kid and flavoured with screwpine, which is also known as pandan. I'm particularly fond of biryanis — the baked rice carries flavour more dexterously, subtly and individually than the ghee- or oil-stewed curries. Almost all the Indian dishes that we know as mutton were originally made with goat. The English didn't like the idea of eating goat as much as the more homely sheep, so the cooks just told them everything was mutton. In truth, goats are harderier ➤

and better at fending for themselves than sheep on the subcontinent. And it's hard to tell them apart. If in doubt as to whether it's a sheep or a goat that's being slaughtered for your dinner, look behind: goats' tails go up, sheep's hang down.

Vegetarian options are as good as the meat ones — a collection of potato chaat, a good paneer, and aloo cooked with peanut and raisins. Pudding was moreish salted-caramel kulfi. I drank the best lassi I've been offered outside India.

Chutney Mary's great success is its constant investigation of the enormous variety and ingenuity of south Asian cuisine, and Camellia Panjabi has spent decades being a culinary Clouseau, questing for recipes and questioning cooks. There are surprisingly few homegrown Indian cookbooks: families and restaurants tend to see recipes as trade secrets, to be guarded, sometimes with murder. And not much about India, let alone Indian food, is straightforward. This restaurant is a testament to a lifetime of forensic appetite and experience.

The one restaurant staple I did miss from this menu was gulab jamun — an incredibly sweet sweet, made from milk that has been reduced to a sort of pastry, then soaked in an infused sugar syrup. It's a very old dish that originally came from Persia, and was eaten by Muslims at Eid and Hindus at Diwali — and by me whenever there's a vowel in the day.

I once spoke to Camellia about my love for it, and she said: "Oh, well, there is only one place we must go," and immediately she took me, for 1½ hours, through the darkened streets of Mumbai. We were already in Mumbai; we didn't start off in St James's. We arrived at a tiny shop where men were making the most divine pudding ever conceived. This, she said, with the particular pride of someone sharing a secret that involves food, is the third generation of a family that has done nothing but make gulab — and they've grown very good at it.

Definitively, sticking best rosettes on restaurants is a coarse and reductive business that is unbecoming of the hard work and endless variables of the hospitality industry. But if there is a better pan-Indian restaurant in London than Chutney Mary, I haven't eaten in it ■

Chutney Mary

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