

## Forget Dishoom: Veeraswamy is London's more intriguing Indian restaurant

ADAM BLOODWORTH



Veeraswamy, Britain's oldest Indian restaurant, is the future of London curry houses

*Forget Dishoom. Veeraswamy is the inspiration for the UK's beleaguered curry houses, says Adam Bloodworth*

Anjan Saha, general manager at Veeraswamy, does not mess around. "Which starters shall I order?" I asked from a throne like chair, the type of ostentatious bottom cushioning that should look tacky but is somehow pulled off. "All of them!" said Saha, smiling but deadly serious. Soon he carried through with his promise.

Tender lamb Gilafi Seekh Kebab, tandoori green prawns, a showstopping paneer tikka, raj kachori and something with gooey cheese arrived at our table. We'd been practically force fed cocktails by waiting staff and it was late at night, which, by the way, is the only time to dine at Indian restaurants. (Call me British but there is nothing better than combining our home grown proficiency to be half-cut with something incredibly spicy.)

We bombed through the family-sized lot. The raj kachori was like a blown up version of a glimmering wedding ring, with pomegranate jewels, cream, and spiced potato innards. It had a gently sweet, moreish chutney the type you could never buy off shelves. A beetroot croquette with chilli and stilton was a thoughtful fusion that would be messed up under the care of most chefs. The prawns were so big and juicy they were almost unwieldy.

Uh-oh. We were full. But the staff were oscillating around our table and saying things like 'the lamb biryani is a house speciality'. Had we mucked up and got too excited too soon?

The idea of eating a week's worth of food in two hours is an admirable idea, and one that I can get behind – in theory. It is a generosity touted by multiple cultures. In Ireland they lure you into another pit. At English homes they pile up more roasties, but after an Indian it's customary to leave fearing for your life.

In fairness, Veeraswamy would be a pleasant place to kick the bucket. The cosy dining room looks as sparkly and impressive as a state room at an Indian Mahal, but everyone's so friendly you feel like you could kick off your shoes and sit on the floor, spooning Lamb Biryani into your mouth like Bridget Jones if she'd given up Ben and Jerry's for something savoury.

Part of the magic is how the cosiness clashes with the jarringly central locale. Londoners walk past this dining room, fitted with portraits of key Indian dignitaries and carpets thicker than naan bread, every week without realising it. It's slap bang above some of the biggest high street stores in London, on one of the busiest shopping streets. Thank goodness for double glazing.

My Indian friend, whose mother can spend hours a day cooking, found depth in the spice combinations he hadn't tasted before. Served in splendid metalware, my biryani was perfectly classic: an ensemble of lamb and rice that have been gleefully messed with, with insertions of cardamom, cloves and cinnamon doing the talking.

Perhaps tennis and James Bond legend Vijay Amritraj's wine made us feel gushy, but this was terribly good. Or perhaps it was the after dinner espresso martinis (not so Indian, but very London) Saha bought over. We shall never know.

The UK's curry houses are closing at an alarming rate, and some experts are suggesting they need to innovate the formula as Britain's restaurant options increase with every passing year. Forget Dishoom, I say: this is the proper deal. Approaching their centenary and Britain's oldest Indian restaurant, Veeraswamy is the template more should follow: innovative spins on classics and properly generous old school Indian hospitality without any marketing shtick. And just properly good fun.

Book in, kick off your shoes and undo the belt. You've had fair warning.