

New reviews

Veeraswamy



Karma chameleon Veeraswamy's latest new look

★★★★★

Granddaddy of London's Indian restaurants gets a(nother) makeover

London's oldest surviving Indian restaurant, Veeraswamy (est 1926), has had more incarnations than Vishnu. I remember eating here as a child in the late 1970s; the thick patterned carpet and those ornate chairs that you find at Indian weddings were my only lasting impressions. My penultimate visit was around four years ago when, after a lengthy debate about food in vividly coloured surroundings, I announced to a group of friends that I was about to walk out of my day job and become a restaurant critic instead. This time, thankfully, all the drama was on the plate.

The newly refurbished and relaunched Veeraswamy showcases regional food, including an array of little-known dishes, from all over India – notably Maharashtra, Rajasthan and Bengal. The menu has a distinctively Mumbai (Bombay) slant: that is, the dishes are pan-Indian, there's a lot of poshed-up street food, and the cooking is characterised by playfulness more than po-faced precision.

Raj kachori is popular street food from Rajasthan and the version here was delectable. A poori (round puffed bread – here a thin pastry case) came crammed with typical Indian street snack ingredients: cubed potatoes, sprouted moong beans, chopped up dahi bhalla (yoghurt-soaked savoury lentil doughnut), papadi (fried pastry strips), and yoghurt and tamarind sauces; topped with coriander leaves and pomegranate seeds, the whole assembly looked like a squat, saucer-shaped Christmas tree. Khichda – a version of lamb, bulgur wheat and lentil stew that was introduced to northern India from the Middle East – was

rich, silky smooth and deeply comforting.

Fish paturi, a Bengali speciality, was a succulent piece of mustard-marinated sea bream served in banana leaves. Kolhapuri kofta was a contemporary version of classic kofta curry. Normally north Indian kofta is cooked in a rich, saffron-suffused moglai masala, while Kolhapuri masala is

'London's oldest Indian restaurant, Veeraswamy, has had more incarnations than Vishnu'

very hot red chillies with lots of spices and coconut from south-west India, but this vegetarian version was neither. It was delicious nonetheless.

Side dishes were slightly less impressive: tandoori potatoes were properly charred, but stuffed with an indistinct vegetable mush, and chorchori (classic stir-fry from Bengal) was coated in an insipid yoghurt gravy. There's an impressive list of Indian breads, but the two we tried should have been much softer: red roomali (tomato-flavoured 'handkerchief bread') and ajwani lacha (layered flat-bread spiked with ajwain – a distinctively pungent, citrusy spice).

US food writer Jeffrey Steingarten once memorably described Indian desserts as 'tasting of face cream' – but here the own-made kala jaam (semolina and milk dumplings in rose-scented syrup) and rasgollas (poached paneer dumplings) were fabulous.

Veeraswamy is the fruit of Namita and Camellia Panjabi, the spice girls behind

the popular Masala Zone chain, and acclaimed restaurants Chutney Mary and Amaya. Like the latter two, the decor here is vibrantly glamorous, and the design makes the most of the restaurant's awkward layout. There's a black-and-gold granite floor laid with luxuriant carpet, Indian miniature-style paintings, and silver grilles. The dining areas are beautifully lit with a plethora of gorgeous chandeliers, colourful glass lamps and flickering lights. This new-look

Veeraswamy might not be completely celestial, but it's closer to nirvana than previous incarnations. *Sejal Sukhadwala Veeraswamy, Victory House, 99-101 Regent St (entrance off Swallow St), W1B 4RS (020 7734 1401) Piccadilly Circus tube. Open Mon-Fri 12.30-2.15pm, 5.30pm-10.30pm; Sat 12.30pm-2.30pm, 5.30pm-10.30pm; Sun 12.30-2.30pm, 6-10.30pm. Meal for two with wine and service: around £100. Set lunch £16.50 for three courses.*

Time Out reviews anonymously and pays for meals.

The bill

Raj kachori	£6
Khichda	£6.50
Sea bream paturi	£18.50
Kolhapuri kofta	£12.50
Chorchori	£6.50
Tandoori aloo	£5.50
Ajwani lacha	£2.60
Roomali red roti	£2.50
Rasgollas	£5.50
Kala jaam	£5.50
Bottle still water	£3.70
French light red wine	£21.50
Sub-total	£96.80
12.5% service	£12.10
Total	£108.90

Food&Drink