

Star for Soul Curry

The culinary edifice that is Veeraswamy, a nine decade-old Indian restaurant on London's Regent Street, has been awarded the highly coveted Michelin Star for 2017.

Written by **Shantanu David** | Published: October 11, 2016 12:15 am



Interiors of the restaurant

When the “British Empire Exhibition” was officially opened by King George V on his namesake saint's day, April 23, 1924, it was a spectacle like London had never seen before. Stretched over the expanse of Wembley Park, it featured the wonders and mysteries from all four corners of the empire, which encompassed 58 regions at the time, and was the first exhibition ever to feature food stalls. Exotic goods from around the world clamoured for

attention, each in their own pavilion and inspired from the nation they represented. If the Burmese pavilion was built into a temple, the Arab nations were represented by a fort in the desert. And on one side of the high-towered and domed Indian Pavilion, lay an Indian restaurant with cooks imported from the country, and excellently run by one Edward Palmer, of E. P. Veerasawmy & Co.. Palmer was particularly well-versed in various Indian cuisines and would go on to write and publish *Indian Cookery: For Use in All Countries* by E.P.

Veerasawmy, a comprehensive tome on the subject in 1936. It was in his blood, one might say; his great-grandmother was the Indian princess Begum Faiz Baksh, while his grandmother was another Indian lady, possibly named Veeraswamy.

After the exhibition finally shut its grounds two years later, Palmer having run a highly successful food operation, decided to expand, and opened UK's first Indian restaurant — the more authentic-sounding Veeraswamy, located just off the venerable Regent Street in the West End of London. And though it changed owners many times over its 90-year history, it has continued to serve carefully curated Indian food. Under the aegis of Ranjit Mathrani and Camellia and Namita Panjabi for the last 20 years, the restaurant added another milestone to its culinary edifice when it was recently awarded the highly coveted Michelin Star for 2017, a highly unprecedented honour for such an aged establishment. Not that they've been chasing stars.

According to Mathrani, Chairman of the restaurant group, "While we are very happy to have received recognition from the Michelin guide, our yardstick will always be the gourmand Indian families who come and dine with and tell us that our food is almost as good as it is in their homes.

It's never as good, of course, but we're happy that they feel it reminds them of the fabulous food they cook and eat in their own homes," says Mathrani.

"French restaurants live or die by their Michelin stars, but for ethnic restaurants the true test is diners from that country or region who are familiar

with the food. For instance somebody from Goa will be able to appreciate the subtleties of the 24 spices that go into a xacuti curry,” he adds.

When it first opened, it served traditional food from the Raj with the likes of Duck Vindaloo, Madras Curry and Dak Bungalow Curry to personages such as the Prince of Wales and other European royalty including Prince Axel of Denmark, who is said to have started the tradition of drinking beer with Indian food. Apparently, he enjoyed the food so much on his visit to London, he sent a barrel of Carlsberg to the restaurant every year, who served it to their guests. As cooks and waiters left Veeraswamy to start their own restaurants, they carried forward the tradition of serving beer to slake the heat of the curries.

The restaurant continued to serve the storied citizens of each era, from Charlie Chaplin to Winston Churchill and Indira Gandhi, while undergoing many face lifts. Having been taken over by Mathrani’s MW Eat restaurant group in 1996, the eatery was restored to its ’20’s grandeur in 2006, while the menu served classical regional dishes ranging from a Kerala-style Venison Mutta Kebab served with a Scotched Quail Egg to a Kashmiri Rogan Josh to a Bengali Bhappa Macch. The Duck Vindaloo remains.

“While our menus have naturally evolved keeping in mind dining patterns of the globe and the cuisines have been carefully curated by my wife and sister-in-law (Namita and Camellia, respectively), the ethos of the food at Veeraswamy is still very much the same. We aim to provide the best possible Indian dining experience to our guests in a setting that will evoke that grandeur we associate with our past of maharajas and nobility. That said, we still try to remain a bit playful, wherein we want our guests to feel like royalty without it getting too stuffy. So while our food will be as authentic to its roots as we can possibly make it, we’ll have fun with the presentation,” says Mathrani.

Citing Veeraswamy’s achievement, the Michelin Guide wrote: “The classic dishes from across the country are prepared with considerable care by a very

professional kitchen. The room is awash with colour and it's run with great charm and enormous pride." The news is spreading.

<http://indianexpress.com/article/lifestyle/food-wine/veeraswamy-food-cuisine-london-menu-restaurant-3075910/>