



Veeraswamy 1926-2016: Celebrating a Beautiful Institution

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Images: Veeraswamy from respectively the 1920's, 1950's and 2005 onwards.

Mayfair is bordered by the roads of Park Lane, Oxford Street, Regent Street and Piccadilly, producing an uber-exclusive area that was named after the London event known as the *'May Fair'* which took place during the late seventeenth century. Along Piccadilly, about 100 yards shy of Piccadilly Circus – where Regent Street, Piccadilly and Shaftesbury Avenue meet – is Swallow Street. Stroll down here and you walk past Bentley's, a beautifully reinvigorated eaterie, executive led in the kitchen by the redoubtable Richard Corrigan.

To the uninitiated it may not be clear how to enter the restaurant a little further down, at the end of Swallow Street, the exclusive Indian restaurant Veeraswamy, which is situated on the first floor of a building overlooking Regent Street to the North and Swallow Street to the East. A prime top end restaurant located in prime top end real estate! With a discrete single door entrance to a corridor manned by a receptionist who then guides the visitor to a waiting lift, from whence the culinary journey of discovery unfolds...



It is something of a business conundrum for the food enthusiast who also sets out to be a wise and successful restaurateur: At the top end, says Camellia Panjabi (left), the best regional chefs of India are expensive to hire, manage and retain. In the finest food, the cooking processes they employ will be complex and the ingredients and recipes closely guarded secrets both of which are difficult to obtain and

therefore expensive to deliver. Further there is the location – a first floor overlooking Regent Street on a large site has high costs associated. You have to be sure of your markets, says Camellia, as all of these factors lead to a higher price point and you must trust that your client base appreciate, enjoy and return to the venue that is delivering the highest quality of food and service in such surroundings.

Camellia Panjabi is a director of the company MWEat, which acquired the site of Veeraswamy in the mid-1990s and set out to sympathetically restore the restaurant to its former glories and beyond. The end product is quite stunning, easily seducing all of the senses of the diner. This is of little surprise however as MWEat boast a fine track record in the top end of the restaurant business, with their portfolio including the Michelin starred Amaya in Belgravia as well as Chutney Mary (now in its new home of St James' Street). Further, the family run group are also wise to the changing times, through for example, their astute expansion of the Masala Zone outlets. These restaurants bring Indian street food and authentic curries to the mid-market in informal, relaxed and accessible surroundings. Its about making the most of the demand curve and product differentiating in order to bring the best possible product to each type of knowledgeable and demanding modern customer.

The ambition of Veeraswamy in 2016 is clear and extends beyond the desire to marry the old with the new, the traditional with the modern, or even the North with the South of Indian cooking. To understand the full breadth and history of Indian food is bordering on a degree subject; Camellia Panjabi's groundbreaking book '50 Great Curries of India' <http://www.amazon.co.uk/Camellia-Panjabi/e/B001KE7V8E> has sold over 1.25 million copies worldwide and was the result of painstaking research into food found across India.



Image: Tasting Menu selection of curries for main courses in tasting menu.

Many dishes originated in private homes and remained closely guarded secrets. To properly deliver a high end 'taste of India' therefore required a variety of specialist chefs in the modern day Veeraswamy kitchen. This has provided a great draw to the customer as well as a great challenge to the cost effectiveness (and smooth man management) in the running of the restaurant. All of this is a significant extension to the classical French kitchen, where the hierarchy might be dictated by the passion and vision of one master chef. A broader discussion on Indian cuisines can be found elsewhere on fine dining guide <http://fine-dining-guide.com/profile-camellia-panjabi-of-mw-eat-sept-2015>



Image: Starter from the vegetarian tasting menu at Veeraswamy 2016.

The history of Veeraswamy stems from 1924 when Edward Palmer, a trader of chutneys and spices, was named the official caterer for the Great Exhibition at Wembley. This whetted his appetite to open a luxury Indian restaurant, which became the original Veeraswamy at Victory House on Regent Street. Eight years later William Stewart MP bought the restaurant and significantly restored and upgraded the site. The new owner had a passion for India and in particular her food, it is said that he travelled over 200,000 miles in search of knowledge about the country and her cuisine. Sir William was rewarded with word of the quality of the restaurant spreading around the world. After 32 years he retired with the business eventually being taken up in late 1996 by Ranjit Mathrani and Namita Panjabi. By 2005 the forward looking but sympathetic refurbishment to the former halcyon days was completed.

So as 90 years of this beautiful institution are celebrated amongst owners and generations of regulars, the bold statements on plate and of decor, reminiscent of the Maharaja Palaces of a bygone era, continue to shine in this little corner of Mayfair and delight and enlighten yet further generations of guests. Indeed during 2016, to celebrate 90 years of Veeraswamy, there is an opportunity to sample a selection of 'Royal Dishes' which are proposed by the restaurant. No doubt with the stewardship in safe hands, the future for Veeraswamy remains bright as the site continues to go from strength to strength.

Reference: Royal Dishes. Contact Veeraswamy on 020 7734 1401 for reservations.

Patiala Shahi Raan – lamb shank slow cooked for 6 hours. A recipe from the legendary royal kitchen of Patiala, served with marrow sauce.

Shahjahani Badami Chicken – Mughal recipe, boneless chicken breast in almond, nutmeg & saffron sauce

Asafjahi Lamb Pasanda – from the palace of the nizam of Hyderabad – lamb picatta, clove, fennel, rose petal

Hyderabadi Lamb Biryani – lean lamb, subtle spicing, herbs and aged basmati rice. This dish was on the original Veeraswamy menu in 1926!