

The spice merchant

Ranjit Mathrani's Masala World operates 10 restaurants in central London, but now looks set to take its authentic Indian food and high service standards nationwide

Ranjit Mathrani is not your typical restaurateur. A former investment banker, he spent much of his career managing merchant banks and advising governments and

corporations on privatisations and large-scale project financing. But a head for numbers and a strong stomach for risk and deals happens to be highly relevant experience for running a group of restaurants. Now in his mid-60s, Mathrani looks content with his vocation, observing the bustle of the West End from his Regent Street restaurant Veeraswamy and making calls on his iPhone 4.

He is married to Namita Panjabi, another ex-banker (latterly a respected designer) and the sister of Camellia Panjabi, the ex-marketing director at the Taj Group where she launched 40 restaurants including London's Bombay Brasserie and the Ile de Kashmir in Paris. In the mid-1990s, Mathrani advised Namita and Camellia on the purchase and operational set-up of Chelsea restaurant Chutney Mary, which became an overnight hit with critics and diners alike.

Initially his involvement with the restaurant was born of a desire to catalyse and monetise the talents of his wife and sister-in-law, but as things progressed it became clear that the restaurant business had been in his blood all along. The trio purchased the ailing Veeraswamy in 1997 and, shortly afterwards, Mathrani stepped back from the City to become a full-time restaurateur.

The three deferred to specific roles within the business - Mathrani handling finance and ops, Camellia overseeing the food and marketing and Namita creating interiors and branding. The first challenge Mathrani set the group remains his biggest to date: to bring authentic

Words
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Indian cooking to the mid-market and take on the curry houses at their own game. Masala Zone, now the largest branded Indian restaurant outfit in the UK, was born.

"It felt like a missionary endeavour to bring real Indian food to the UK," recalls Mathrani. "People's palates have been afflicted by thousands of Bangladeshi-owned restaurants. I don't think these places are representative of real Indian food. We wanted to do something that was authentically Indian and that meant a regional approach."

Fast forward to today and the group now operates 10 sites in central London. Three fine-dining restaurants - Chutney Mary, Veeraswamy and Michelin-starred grill Amaya in Knightsbridge - plus seven Masala Zones, serving a combined total of one million customers a year. Camellia, who now lives in Mumbai, is a world-renowned expert in Indian food and the group

favours employing chefs directly from India, trained in a specific aspect or region of the country's cuisine. Dishes are made fresh on site each and every day. Food quality is high across the group and all the restaurants do well in the guides.

US influence

It may come as a surprise that the boss of a group famed for the authenticity and quality of its food believes service is a more important attribute to a restaurant than cooking. As a rule, investment bankers spend a lot of time in restaurants, and Mathrani was no exception. His former career saw him experience hospitality at all levels - restaurants and hotels, airlines, and conferences all over the world.

"It gave me a great understanding of service, an appreciation of the different stages and elements that became a very useful skill as I moved into the restaurants business," says Mathrani.

"I have observed what works and what doesn't from the customer's point of view."

So, as anyone that has eaten at one of Masala World's restaurants will tell you, the service takes its cues from American hospitality rather than European. "The Americans achieve the complex balance of courtesy and informality better than the Brits," he says. "People come to enjoy themselves, the quality of the food is a backcloth. Warmth and friendliness is paramount. When people come to a restaurant they spend their money but even more importantly they spend their time. You have to give a good overall experience - you can't hide behind good food."

Another idea borrowed from across the pond is embracing the use of student labour. Like many US operators, Mathrani relies on students almost exclusively for non-senior front-of-house positions. "Get them young, get them bright, get them energetic. It's a great way to go, but it does put huge pressure on the training side," he says.

Masala World is one of the few restaurant groups that operates both fine and casual-dining sites. To

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Lunchtime: Masala Zone's take on the thali

achieve a better service standard across the group, there is significant cross-fertilisation between the restaurants. "We like to loosen up the fine-dining people in the casual restaurants and get high-end techniques into Masala Zone. Three of our restaurants may be fine dining, but the friendliness, the smile, the explanation of the dishes and the way staff are trained is identical across the group."

This linked-up approach feeds through to the kitchen too: a core dish from Masala Zone may be taken to Chutney Mary and refined, or a high-end dish from Veeraswamy could be taken to Masala Zone and simplified.

Currying favour nationwide

The business is privately owned through family trusts, which is unusual for a restaurant company of Masala World's size. It may operate only 10 units but turnover is over £20m per annum. When Mathrani entered the business he had enough capital to fund expansion and - with his considerable experience in the City - knew enough about partnerships, venture capitalists and shareholders to want to keep things in the family.

"Having a partnership with your wife and sister-in-law is complicated enough. Happily I had enough funds to avoid bringing anyone else into the equation," he explains. "We're answerable only to each other, it's a good situation to be in."

While the group's three fine-dining restaurants are hugely successful, the sole focus of Masala

The Masala World family

Masala Zone

With seven sites, Masala Zone is now the largest branded Indian restaurant group in the UK. The first unit opened off Carnaby Street in 2001 to considerable critical acclaim. The business model relies on large sites, at least 80 covers, and spend per head is £11-£16, though less at lunch. Diners can order an à la carte selection of mains and sides, but one of the most popular choices is a thali, a tray containing lots of little dishes.

Chutney Mary

A modern approach to regional Indian cooking. Chutney Mary broke the mould when it opened in 1990, paving the way for many other Indian restaurants. Presentation may be contemporary at this Chelsea restaurant, but the dishes remain true to classic Indian recipes. The new romantic interior combines Indian richness and sparkle with moody lighting and 1840s sepia etchings of Indian life.

World's expansion is Masala Zone. As it is with most successful casual-dining operators, the main barrier to expansion is a lack of suitable sites. Despite this, Masala Zone looks set to be one of the few (and certainly the largest and most successful) Indian restaurant brands to go nationwide.

Veeraswamy

The oldest Indian restaurant in the UK, Veeraswamy was in need of some TLC when it was brought by Mathrani in 1997. The relaunch of the restaurant was a huge success; the regional approach to food is broadly similar to Chutney Mary but the presentation is traditional to reflect the heritage of the space. Veeraswamy has views of Regent Street and Piccadilly Circus, and the décor is bright, eclectic and unmistakably Indian.

Amaya

Sleek and modern, Masala World's Knightsbridge fine-dining restaurant focuses on grilled dishes. What sets the eatery apart from any other Indian concept in the UK is its mission to separate Indian flavours and cooking from heavy sauces. Since it opened in 2005 Amaya has picked up a raft of awards including a Michelin star. The design is contemporary, utilising marble and modern Indian art with a theatrical open kitchen.

"We wanted to build up a core in London; we needed the hub and the infrastructure to move forward. But we're now looking seriously at sites in the south-east: Brighton, Oxford, Cambridge, Guildford and Kingston-on-Thames. Our brand has the potential to move to between 40 and 50 sites in the UK, a similar number to Wagamama which, incidentally, has similar site selection criteria to us: large sites in densely-populated areas."

Expansion will initially be funded organically, but to achieve these ambitious numbers, Mathrani is looking to adopt a franchise model. Numerous casual brands - including YO! Sushi and Wagamama - use franchise models to expand their business overseas, but if successful, Masala Zone will be exploring hitherto unknown territory for a major casual operator. "The food side needs to become more de-skilled," he says. "The key challenge for us is preserving the taste, but we are making progress."

The news that Masala Zone is looking for sites outside the M25 is highly significant. The family-owned structure of Indian businesses in the UK has not been conducive to growth and - although independent curry houses make up a significant part of the restaurant landscape - branded Indian food operators are conspicuous by their absence.

But cultural differences in business dealings are not the only reason. Mathrani believes that the proposition of his peers has not been strong enough. "Fundamentally, the role of a typical curry house is to provide cheap, reasonably spiced protein with stodge on the side. By their nature, curry houses are not in the business of selling a particularly memorable experience. The thing I love about the business is that it's market capitalism at its most simple, you stand and fall on your product."

While other Indian operators may not agree with this sentiment, the outspoken Mathrani - with his keen understanding of the market, deep pockets and a strong concept - looks well placed to become a national force. **■**



Veeraswamy: the oldest Indian restaurant in the UK takes a traditional approach to dining

Masala Zone: the chain takes on Indian curry houses at their own game

Amaya: the high-end Knightsbridge restaurant boasts a Michelin star

CV

1943 - Born in India

1962 - Reads Mechanical Sciences at Cambridge where he meets Camellia Panjabi

1967 - Starts work as a senior civil servant in the fields of economic and industrial policy

1984 - Becomes a director at investment bank Lazard

1993 - Starts own financial advisory business, specialising in privatisation and large-scale project financing

1990 - Helps wife Namita Panjabi and sister-in-law Camellia Panjabi open Chutney Mary with Chez Gérard founder Neville Abraham

1996 - The trio buy out partners at Chutney Mary

1997 - Purchases and relaunches Veeraswamy

2001 - Opens the first Masala Zone

2005 - Launches upmarket Indian grill Amaya - the restaurant wins a Michelin star less than a year after opening

2006-2010 - Masala World opens six more Masala Zones in central London locations



Ranjit Mathrani: made a seamless transition from banker to restaurateur