



A more graceful age: Veeraswamy

Veeraswamy ★★★★★

99 Regent Street (entrance in Swallow Street), W1 (020 7734 1401)

Open daily, lunch 12.30-2.15pm, dinner 5.30-10.30pm (6-10pm Sunday). Three-course set lunch and pre- and post-theatre menu £16.50. A la carte, a meal for two with wine, about £110 including 12.5 per cent service.

VEERASWAMY, established in 1926 (although some say 1927) by Edward Palmer, the great-grandson of the

private secretary to Warren Hastings, the 18th century governor-general of India, is the UK's oldest surviving Indian restaurant.

When the current owners, Camellia and Namita Panjabi and Ranjit Mathrani, first took possession several years ago, they decided to turn their back on history in terms of its look and design. Their recently completed total refurbishment aims to re-capture something of what we think of as a more graceful age. Bright colours have been banished, the ceiling raised to its original height, the seating made more seductive and the lighting more alluring and authentic, but most sensibly and importantly, the menu evidences no nostalgia for the time when Veeraswamy sauces were sold in tins.

The kitchen, led by Gopal

Kochak, finds inspiration from all over the sub-continent and from understanding of the way we like to eat now. Four of us made considerable inroads into the long menu but still left much crying out to be explored.

Star turns among our first courses were green leaf bhajias — leaves and herbs cloaked in feathery batter — served with two dipping sauces; raj kachori, a cricket-ball-sized puffed puri filled with grains, pulses and vegetables spiced with a sweet-sour chutney; and khichda, a slow-cooked dish of lamb, bulgur wheat, lentils and spices simmered until a texture with the comfort of a cashmere blanket is achieved. We also liked the hot crab kebab — a two-chillies symbol warns of its powerful punch.

Most of the main-course dishes are designed for sharing, and cast-iron casseroles perched on warming lights makes the activity visually pleasing as well as emotionally satisfying. Kerala Syrian Christian chicken stew comes in a subtle coconut-and-ginger sauce with appams — those lacy bowl-shaped rice flour pancakes — served alongside for scooping it up.

Sea bream paturi is a Bengali dish of fillets of fish steamed in banana leaf parcels with the flavourings of chilli and mustard. The impact is both delicate and insistent.

BY FAY MASCHLER



'I predict that burrata cheese will soon be the hot, new, must-have ingredient'

A Hyderabadi lamb biryani was apparently on the original Veeraswamy menu — a list that included a large section of European dishes — but I doubt very much that it was as fine as this contemporary rendition with all the scents and flavours, including that of basmati rice, sealed into the pot.

Vegetable dishes of saag, a spinach purée flavoured with fresh fenugreek leaves, and sukhe aloo, spiced potatoes, were both excellent, as their price of £5.50 each would make you hope. Potatoes take up spices in such a satisfactory way but when those potatoes are themselves superior specimens, it becomes a wonderful dish. It is worth ordering the speciality bread basket to discover the heights that flour and water can reach.

There were long waits for dishes and rather too many enquiries as to whether everything was all right. It was. Mathew Jukes has designed the wine list, another detail that has put the new Veeraswamy way ahead of its previous incarnation. It is worth noting that the restaurant is open for Christmas Day lunch.

Ratings: ★★★★★ outstanding; ★★★★☆ excellent; ★★★☆☆ very good; ★★☆☆☆ good; ★☆☆☆☆ adequate; ☆☆☆☆☆ poor