

The spice girls

Camellia and Namita Panjabi, along with Ranjit Mathrani, have put Indian cuisine on a high pedestal in the UK, building a multi-million pound food and catering empire

"Chicken *tikka masala* is now a true British national dish, not only because it is the most popular, but because it is a perfect illustration of the way Britain absorbs and adapts external influences. Chicken *tikka* is an Indian dish. The *masala* sauce was added to satisfy the desire of British people to have their meat served in gravy."

— British foreign secretary Robin Cook, in a speech on 19 April 2001

You can get a sense of what's important to someone by the tales she narrates. At her home in South Mumbai, sitting next to a huge plate-glass window overlooking the Arabian Sea, London-based restaurateur Namita Panjabi is telling a story about Indian food in the UK in the 1990s. London then, she says, was predominantly dotted with cheap curry houses, serving Bangladeshi fare and anonymous Indian food, often brown sludge in deep bowls, indistinguishable from one another, and pre-cooked prawns and chicken pieces tossed in a curry base. "You don't just fling the ingredients around," says Namita. "That certainly wasn't Indian cooking!"

Nonetheless, it was the comfort curry – hugely economical for numbers, but fiercely competitive for someone who had just begun her cuisine career with a fine-dining restaurant. Goaded by sister Camellia – then marketing director, Taj Hotels, and an internationally-renowned cookbook writer, who helped Taj launch almost 40 restaurants in 32 years – and backed by merchant banker husband, Ranjit Mathrani, Namita had launched the upmarket diner, *Chutney Mary*, in 1990, amidst rave press reviews and all-round praise. The venture made a splash not only among Indian restaurants, but also across the industry.

However, Namita soon realised that it was a tough call. While everyone loved *Chutney Mary's* offering and hospitality, the common refrain was: the

food is too expensive for being Indian. After all, Indian restaurants used to be a place to go after the pubs closed. "That's where you only entertained your mother-in-law; never your banker," says Camellia wryly. "We had to spend years breaking these taboos and convincing customers that Indian cuisine is as exclusive as Italian or French food," asserts Namita.

And it's diverse too. *Chutney Mary* was a pioneer to unravel cuisines from various regions of India – Lucknow and Punjab in the north, Gujarat and Mumbai in the west, Hyderabad and Chettinad in the south, and Goa and Kerala on the southwest coast. "It was imperative to emphasise that India is culturally as diverse as Europe and that there is no universal Indian food," affirms Namita. "Do we ever say: let's have European food tonight? It's always Italian, French, Greek or some other cuisine. Indian food too is equally varied and complex."

From that first day in 1990, these food-focussed sisters have done their best to put Indian restaurants on a high pedestal in Britain. To offer an authen-



Chutney Mary (left) and Masala Zone

tic culinary experience, Camellia and Namita re-visited the roots of Indian cooking, digging out recipes from the palaces of *maharajahs* and Rajasthani *havelis* and the streets of Mumbai and Delhi to *dhabas* of Lucknow and Ludhiana. They rumbled up the dirt roads to visit home kitchens of some of the oldest families, studying cuisines that were both unique and familiar. "I would visit traditional families in various cities, taste their food and request them for recipes," confides Camellia, who also visited libraries in Britain and India for her research. "Princess Esra of Hyderabad gave me the recipes given



Namita, Ranjit and Camellia: on a roll

PALASHRANJAN BHAVNICK



to her when she entered Hyderabad as a bride after marrying the Nizam.”

All this despite the fact that they are first-generation entrepreneurs, and came into culinary career via a circuitous route. Educated in Mumbai and Cambridge, Camellia and Namita studied economics and finance, before branching out into different vocations. Camellia returned to Mumbai, joined the Tatas and eventually landed in Taj Hotels, whereas Namita stayed back, worked with Midland Bank in London for three years, and then returned to Mumbai to join Grindlays Bank, which was just starting the first merchant banking division.

In the late 1970s, a fortuitous meeting with an American buyer made Namita change lanes. She moved from merchant banking into merchandising and joined the Mumbai office of the US-based Associated Merchandising Corporation, which represented international departmental stores looking to source from India. The job, she says, was exciting, especially travelling to fashion capitals of the world – Paris, London, Milan and New York – to study the latest trends and cultivating Indian craftsmen to produce quality stuff. “This was a time when Americans and Europeans began sourcing from India,” she explains. “I witnessed the transformation of India, from an exotic culture to a country that had plenty to offer for western stores.”

Namita spent over a decade as fashion and jewellery merchandiser, putting Indian diversity on to the global stage, until her marriage to Ranjit in the mid-1980s took her back to London, and a suggestion by Camellia drove her into the dining business. Who would have thought a banker would open riveting restaurants? “I believe things happen because you happen to be at some place at a particular time,” says Namita.

London’s happening spot

Time also favoured *Chutney Mary*, which, within a short span, became one of London’s happening spots. In 1997, the trio – Camellia, Namita and Ranjit, partners and promoters of *Masala World* – decided to buy the city’s oldest Indian restaurant, *Veeraswamy*. The eatery dates back to 1926 and was started by a lover of India and Indian cuisine, Edward Palmer. His great, great grandmother was the last Moghul princess of Delhi, and his great, great grandfather General William Palmer served under Warren Hastings. Though it changed hands several times, *Veeraswamy* was an opulent restaurant frequented by royalty, which included King Gustav of Sweden, Edward Prince of Wales and King Hussein of Jordan. “When it came up for sale, we went for it, even though some friends advised us against it, saying it was a jinxed place and never

made much money,” reveals Namita.

By that logic, *Masala World* would have remained a two-restaurant pony, an also-ran player in the burgeoning food business in the UK. But particularly after 2000, when Camellia came on board full time and Ranjit began devoting more energy, they decided to grow the group. The trio indulged in serious debate about the group’s future strategy and came up with the *Masala Zone* concept, which meant building mid-market jazzy cafes to offer quality street food at affordable prices.

Why walk down the value chain? “In the good old days, younger Britons would frequent Indian restaurants after they had a drink or two in a pub,” explains Camellia. “But with the pub culture diminishing, you need a place to attract young crowds, who would patronise good Indian food once they start making money.” Adds Namita, “The conversion to Indian food would not happen if youngsters don’t understand what our cuisine is all about.”

In 2000, the group launched its maiden, mid-market casual dining restaurant in Soho, followed by two more soon thereafter. *Masala Zones* are large, buzzy cafes serving light, tangy, nutritious and quality *chaats* and *thalis* at pocket-friendly prices. “We wanted to take the curry houses head-on and the only way to do it was to get numbers, so that economies work for us,” says Namita. “One of the defining



Veeraswamy (left) and Amaya

characteristics of these restaurants is giving each one a unique visual identity, which clothes a consistent unified product," adds Ranjit, who was appointed High Sheriff of Greater London in April 2010. They also decided that all members of the staff need not be Indians and if Indians could serve European food, Europeans could work in Indian restaurants too.

Even as these hip cafes gained popularity, the group re-visited its fine-dining skills and created Michelin-starred *Amaya* in 2004. "With *Amaya*, we pushed the boundaries and introduced a unique experience of Indian grills," asserts Camellia. It paid off. Within a year, *Amaya* bagged two industry awards – Tio Pepe RTV Award for Best Restaurant and Best New Restaurant award. In 2006, the upmarket restaurant – which always has a waiting list – joined a select band of Indian eateries with a Star in any Michelin Red Guide.

Today, *Masala World* comprises three fine-dining restaurants – *Chutney Mary*, *Veeraswamy* and *Amaya* – and seven *Masala Zones*, making it the largest grouping of Indian diners in London. In 2010, the company's cash registers grossed over £20 million (₹140 crore), feeding a million customers, four-fifths of which were westerners. Though privately held, with membership details unpublished, "our EBIDTA is in line with the restaurant industry average – in excess of 15 per cent", reveals Ranjit. While upper and mid-market restaurants contribute equally to the kitty, *Masala Zones*, Ranjit feels, would bring in a larger share,

especially after the group's plans to build a few more fructify. "We are keen to set up some more *Masala Zones*, but good properties are difficult to come by in London," says Camellia.

Promising markets

So, why not venture out of London and the UK? "We are approached frequently with requests to franchise our brand globally by companies which have recognised the uniqueness and enduring quality of our offering," reveals Ranjit. "There is huge potential for Indian food the world over," adds Namita, citing West Asia, parts of Europe and the US as promising markets. Camellia, on the other hand, feels that India is the most logical market for the group's expansion. "We can offer quality food at prices which are attractive in India itself," she affirms.

While the trio is confident of its concept – especially *Masala Zone* – travelling the world, the UK remains their main theatre of operation. "There is enough to do in London, which has become the food capital of the world," feels Namita. This is particularly true of Indian cuisine, which has become an indispensable element of British dining. Sample this. Today, 12,000 Indian restaurants dish out over two million meals a week, raking in an amount estimated at £3.0-3.5 billion a year.

While the size seems impressive, the recession has impacted customers' discretionary expenditure. Also, according to Ranjit, due to low entry barriers, the food business in the UK is flooded with naïve investors who are often chef/manager/owner or HNIS

dabbling in business. "We need to fire on all cylinders – understand the market, combine product quality with razor-sharp financial controls and implement management information systems to survive," he explains.

The other concern is paucity of well-trained chefs, made worse by the British government's tightening immigration policies, and growing talent shortage in India. "Though there is huge demand for Indian cuisine, the teaching standards in India are not up to the mark," rues Namita. Does it merit opening new catering colleges in the country? No, replies Camellia. "Hardly 10 per cent of the curriculum in catering colleges comprises cooking. What we need is culinary training schools and vocational institutes teaching Indian food to better the situation." *Masala World*, which employs 600 persons, has been able to retain talent by offering a motivating environment, culture and compensation. "This has enabled us to never compromise on our quality and dilute our concept. We are not in the business of serving hurry-curry mixes," asserts Namita.

So, where does the concept go from here? "It has taken us years to understand the game and refine the concept. The ball is ready to roll. But we are not going to take it and run. The younger generation has to push it forward," says Camellia. "Our role is more likely to be that of providing the key product skills and expertise," adds Ranjit. For the present, though, the trio is on a roll. "There is never a dull moment in our culinary career," says Namita.

♦ ANOOP BABANI