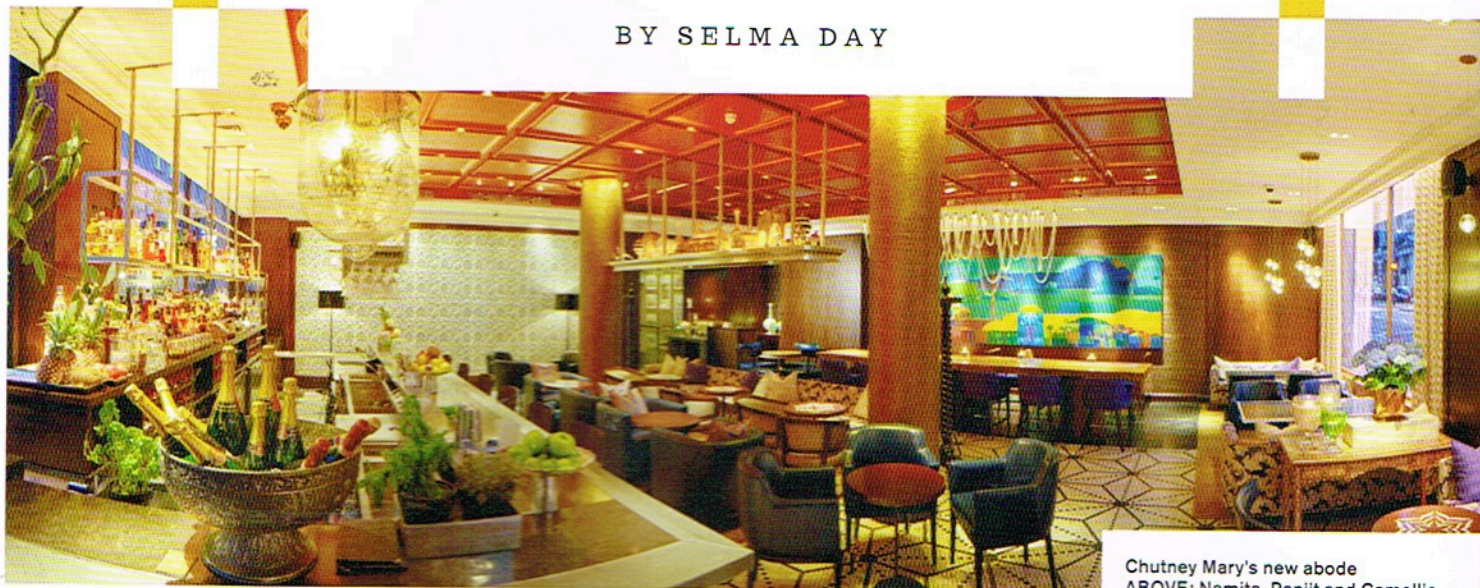


# THE SPICE OF LIFE

Gourmet Indian stalwart Chutney Mary has relocated from its Chelsea roots to St James's Street. We meet the owners and find their passion for the business is as hot as ever

BY SELMA DAY



Chutney Mary's new abode  
ABOVE: Namita, Ranjit and Camellia



**A**fter 25 years in Chelsea – in the King's Road – Chutney Mary has relocated to St James's Street, on the site that was previously Marco Pierre White's Wheeler's. The restaurant is part of the MW Eat group that includes Michelin-starred Amaya in Belgravia, Veeraswamy in Regent Street (the UK's oldest Indian restaurant), Masala Grill in King's Road plus seven Masala Zone sites across London.

The owners, Ranjit Mathrani, his wife Namita Panjabi and her sister Camellia Panjabi, have created a restaurant that is eclectic and glamorous yet contemporary at the same time.

When it launched in 1990, Chutney Mary set the benchmark for Indian fine dining and encouraged a new wave of ambitious young chefs to leave India and head to London.

"When I was at college (Cambridge university to be exact), Indian food was cheap and cheerful – to be had after lots of beer," says Namita, who started her working life as a merchant banker. "Those were the days when curry houses dominated the scene. It was fast Indian food made from one mother sauce and fry panned to produce 50 different dishes on the menu. The perception had to change.

"Restaurants such as Chutney Mary broke that mould. We were paying Chelsea rents and buying our ingredients from some of the finest butchers in London. We also took the bold step to plate our food, saying that you would not go to a French restaurant and combine a coq au vin with beef bourguignon on the same plate, so why mix a roghan josh with a Calcutta prawn curry? It's not meant to be eaten that way."

"The turning point in the perception of Indian food came with the launch of Bombay Brasserie, which I did in 1983," says Camellia, who prior to that was head of marketing for Taj Hotels in India.

"Before that, there was no upmarket or stylish Indian restaurant in London. Indian food and glamour had not gone together for a long time, except in the Thirties with Veeraswamy. Not even in India.

"And I think Masala Zone actually kick-started the street food revolution in the UK."

In its latest incarnation, Chutney Mary has retained several of its signature dishes, with the addition of many new ones, such as sautéed Cornish crab in chilli butter; lobster biryani; and Dover sole, lobster and sea bream, all prepared in the tandoor oven.

The à la carte lunch menu features a variety of salads, some small plate options and many lighter choices as well as a range of vegetarian dishes. The set menu from Monday to Friday is priced at a very reasonable £26 for two courses.

The dinner menu is more elaborate with new dishes including guinea fowl reshmi kebabs; quail Musallam; quail pulao; Hyderabad lamb shank; Calcutta wild prawn curry; Afghani chicken tikka; and Rajasthani Lal Maas (osso bucco and boneless lamb).

Desserts include traditional Indian sweet dishes adapted in a contemporary style, such as grapefruit and kokum crème brûlée; salted caramel kulfi; gajjar halwa soufflé; and raspberry and saffron srikhand.

The inspiration for the food at Chutney Mary comes from both sisters growing up in the melting pot that was Bombay (now Mumbai) where they were surrounded by "wonderful regional cuisines".

"At school, we ate in a great big dining hall – 400 children sitting side by side, each one being served by your own ayah who brought the dabba (tiffin carriers) from home every day," says Namita.

"Camellia and I sat with a Parsee brother and sister on one side and a Gujarati girl on the other. We would see all these amazing red fish curries and apricot lamb from the Parsee kitchen and vegetarian dishes on the other side. So, in a way, growing up in cosmopolitan Bombay was a great foodie experience."

This cosmopolitan vibe extends from the restaurant into the 50-seat Pukka Bar at the front. The drinks list features a variety of cocktails, an extensive wine list and non-alcoholic drinks including fresh fruit juices.

The aim now, says Camellia, is simply to, "be the line between the producers of great food, ie. the people who cook, provide and serve, and the people who relish their creations. Customers and their responses – that is my inspiration, how to excite their palates; their verdict; their responses."

Namita agrees: "Hospitality is about your relationship with the eating out public on a day in and day out basis. It gets under your skin and is exciting as hell as it deals with fashion, lifestyle and everything that makes up the current mood of the public."

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Some of the tasty eats and treats to be found on the bar and restaurant menus