

Amaya is so good it's off the scale, says **Matthew Norman**



## AMAYA

Score 11/10

**Eat** Almost everything, but above all grouper and lamb chops

**Take** Who do you really, really love?

**Book** This very instant (Ivy-style wait for tables inevitable)

**Price of dinner for one** £49 (with coffee and half a bottle of house wine)

**Address** Halkin Arcade, Motcomb Street, Knightsbridge, London SW1 (020-7823 1166)

Those of you chained by the bonds of holy wedlock to a spouse who disdains your passion for football may be familiar with the exchange that graced our sitting-room, once again, a few Saturdays ago. Entering the room during during a post-match interview, my wife took instant umbrage when a player said he had given '110 per cent'.

'That's plain stupid,' she observed. 'How can anything be 110 per cent?' Over 13 years, I have often tried to answer this question, sometimes by reference to the inflation rate in 1930s Germany, at others by positing that the cliché doesn't require a strictly analytical approach, but always without success. So my sincere thanks to Amaya for – as anyone who limps to the end of this review will find – finally cracking the conundrum.

First up, this astounding restaurant, tucked away in a Knightsbridge arcade, and owned by the people behind the long-established posh Indians Chutney Mary and Veeraswamy, looks wonderful. The decor is peppered with cute touches (an ultra-modern chandelier, a vast

skylight and statues of ethnic deities), and uses so much dark wood it gives an idea of what it must be like to be a *cohiba especial* and live inside a cigar humidor. It smells even better than that princely havana, the exquisite scent of grilling meat and clay-baked bread mingling with freshly crushed Indian spices.

One side of the room is devoted to the men creating this heavenly aroma, who stand in front of the charcoal grills, and three huge, silver-lined tandoori ovens shaped like the kind of acid-filled vats into which men with white cats always hoped to immerse 007.

The service was impeccable, notably from a sharp-suited manager who took the time to explain the 'concept'. Concepts, generally, are as welcome in restaurants as rats, but this one is admirably simple. You can, if you wish, complete the main part of the meal with a curry or biryani (the one at the next table, served inside a scooped-out paratha, looked glorious), but really it's about 'grazing' – sharing small amounts of as many grilled or tandoor-baked dishes as you can manage.

And what dishes. We had no idea Indian cooking could be this way. Let's deal with the tiny quibble now, by suggesting that the flavour of mussels is too delicate to survive peri-peri sauce (£8)... And with that said and done, the gushing begins with spiced clam cakes (£8 for four), grilled on an iron skillet, which tingled the tongue. From the charcoal grill, meanwhile, came the following: a jumbo tiger prawn (£14.50) the size of a baby lobster, flavoured with lime, chilli and herbs, so fresh and sweet that my only complaint with the menu spiel about it being 'flown fresh from the Arabian sea' was why it didn't add 'in a military jet at Mach 5'; adorable punjabi chicken wing lollipops (six for £4.50), dusted with cinnamon and glazed with tamarind; and four lamb chops (£17.50), with ginger, lime and coriander, of such unbelievable meltiness and savour that it verged on the indecent.

Close on their tail, from the tandoor, arrived two more all-time greats. My only regret about the lamb shanks in masala with a mild chilli kick (£14) – slightly gooey at the edges where the marinade had caramelised – was being too shy to ask if I could take the remnants home to finish sucking out the marrow. As for the fish tikka (£13.50), there were gasps as the first hit of fat chunks of grouper served in a fenugreek leaf hit our tongues. 'I'm shocked,' said our friend. 'I'm honestly shocked. It's one of the finest things ever.' The vegetable side dishes – a mushroom salad with mixed leaves, mango and pomegranate (£9.50); spicy, slow-grilled aubergines (£6.50); spinach cake stuffed with figs (£6.50); and a medley of five types of lentil (£3) – were magnificent too.

So were the breads (£4.50 for a basket of three kinds), and long before we had completed this feast for the gods we were trying to work out how soon we could come back. (Our friend took his wife the next evening, and spent the meal texting me increasingly hysterical paeans of praise.)

As we waddled to the door, I asked my wife how many points out of ten she would give Amaya. 'Eleven,' she said.

'But that's 110 ten per cent,' I replied. 'And surely that's impossible?' 'Oh, for God's sake,' she spat back sweetly. 'Don't be such a bloody pedant.' ●

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