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## Review

# Fay Maschler reviews Masala Zone Soho: Food made with exuberance, pitch and profundity

Our rating: ★ ★ ★ ★ ★

9 Marshall St

Price range: £ £ £

W1F 7ER

[masalazone.com](http://masalazone.com)

Camellia and Namita Panjabi are about the same age as my sister Beth and I, I think. They are dreamily vague on the subject. Much more importantly in their estimation, we have the same star signs, Leo and Cancer respectively. When our mothers were alive, we called their mother Mummy and they called our mother Mummy. Sisters under the skin you could say. Or kissing cousins.

In 1982, while working as marketing director for Taj Hotels, Camellia devised the menu for the launch of Bombay Brasserie in **South Kensington**. Thirty-six years ago it was possible to find, say, Gujarati or Punjabi cooking in modest London establishments, some in far-flung postal districts, but this was the first time the diversity and specific regionality of the cuisine of the sub-continent was celebrated in style. It was a great success and for a while fashionable. **Mick Jagger** visited, for heaven's sake — as did **Prince Charles**.

Later on Camellia began working with Namita and her husband Ranjit Mathrani in a company called Masala World. After launching Chutney Mary in Chelsea and revamping the historic Veeraswamy the family trio opened the first Masala Zone in Soho in 2001. It was what in fashion might be called a diffusion or bridge line. The intention was to create and convey the sort of food Indians in India eat on a daily basis on the street or at home. At its heart are thali, a gathering of various small dishes on a circular tray.

As you might have inferred I am not exactly a dispassionate observer of this business, excitingly — to my mind — situated beside where once was the house where, in 1757, the visionary William Blake was born, he who saw the world in a grain of sand. But I have had meals recently that have impressed me a lot with the pitch and profundity of the sauces, the exuberance of the snacks and the proof that grass never grows under the feet of these Indian pals. Of course competition never ceases.

New to me as starters are lamb sliders where the pao (babyishly soft white bread rolls) have been made in-house and caramelised onions as well as the vehemently spiced lamb force them to grow up quickly. Angrezi (meaning English) oozing cheese balls in a crisp carapace are a favourite in clubs in **India** where what you might call throwback food has an appeal all of its own.



Artistic offerings: Sprouted lentil bhel

Desi (meaning real Indian) is used to describe the chilli garlic potato chips. Here the word could equally be a translation of totally irresistible. Sprouted lentil bhel, that singular combination of goodness, crunch and chutneys, is particularly thoughtfully composed and dressed with chopped salad that, enhanced with fresh coconut, also serves to dot papad (poppadums) that for some are the sine qua non for an Indian spread.

These are skirmishes — champion, I have to say, with a chai spice-infused **Negroni** made with Bombay Dry Gin — before main dishes where time and talent in long preparation reveal the flimsiness of the catch-all word curry. Duck made to a recipe originating from the town of Coondapur is flavoured with ghee-roasted spices and served with a soft dosa (pancake made with fermented rice and lentil batter) for sauce-scooping.



Vibrant plates: Seafood biryani at Masala Zone Soho

A new take on chicken is Bengali rizzala, green with herbs and heady with poppy seeds. An assembly not to be missed is the **seafood** biryani made not with rice but with iddiappam, the fine rice noodles identifiable from string hoppers.

Sidestepping meat, egg kottu paratha is what a landlady I once encountered would call a bit of done-up but here to Madurai Tamil guidelines. Paneer tikka is proof of the heights that can be reached by this fresh curd cheese when made daily and served with fresh fenugreek leaves and yellow chilli.

**Desserts** I try are deliberately lightweight: ginger ice cream and blood orange sorbet. My sister is delighted to discover chaas, a yoghurt drink similar to lassi but more delicate, serving the same purpose of a calming effect. I stick to Mon Roc Syrah/Grenache Rosé 2016 from the Languedoc.

Just so you know, at one of the meals I try for this review I manage to be incognito. Service is just as sweet.



# Masala Zone Soho, in pictures



