

# ORIGINS CAMELLIA PANJABI

The author of best-selling *50 Great Curries of India* started her working life promoting washing powder, but found a culinary path that led to the iconic Bombay Brasserie and, now celebrating 35 years, Chutney Mary



*Born and brought up in Mumbai, Camellia studied economics at Cambridge, but made her way into hospitality with Taj Hotels, introducing new flavours and restaurants, including London's Bombay Brasserie. With a best-selling book on curries under her belt, she helped shape London's Indian culinary scene: Veeraswamy, Amaya, Chutney Mary and the street-food mini chain Masala Zone.*

## Mutton curry

My father was an economist, and I remember his favourite snack: chunks of bread dunked in a mutton curry topped with onion kachumber. My mother, a doctor, loved food but was particular about health, cleanliness and nutrition; she forbade me to eat on the street. She died aged 100. I inherited two things from them: sumptuous food, and nutrition and balance.

## Street food

I studied economics but joined the Tata Group at the age of 21, marketing washing powder! I travelled across India, but there were hardly any restaurants at the time, so all I was eating was street food, such as *chana bhature* in Ludhiana and *dahi bhalla* in Lucknow. I became a street-food junkie.

## Indo-Chinese

I moved across to work in hospitality with the grand Taj Mahal Hotel in 1970. We had to boost revenue through food, and one idea was to bring Sichuan Chinese cuisine into Bombay. Our restaurant, Golden Dragon, became the torchbearer of Indo-Chinese cuisine, which is very popular in India today.

## Tavern on the Green

Travelling the world to promote tourism to my city, I came across excellent large restaurants like Tavern on the Green, an impressive glass structure in New York's Central Park, Langan's Brasserie in London and La Coupole in Paris, which had a grand ambience. It set my imagination on fire and I persuaded the Taj to let me create Bombay Brasserie in London in 1982.

## Indian comfort food

What I learnt from my friend, chef Richard Shepherd of Langan's Brasserie, was how to present comfort food simply, elegantly and with consistency of quality. The foods of Bombay's many communities had never been presented all together before – there was *ragda pattie* from the Bombay streets, Goa prawn curry, Parsi-style chicken with apricots and many others.

## Great curries

Everywhere in the world, I found Indian restaurant cuisine had a sameness about it. It was food that couldn't be made at home: tandoori food cooked in large clay ovens, chunky paneer dishes and butter chicken variations – basically northern Indian food, with none from the west or south. Dismayed by this, I decided to write *50 Great Curries of India* in 1995; it went on to sell two million copies worldwide.

## Masala Zone

In 2001, I came to London to join forces with my sister Namita and her husband Ranjit Mathrani, who were running Chutney Mary and Veeraswamy. I indulged my street-food obsession and the family set up Masala Zone, the first restaurant to introduce street food in Britain. I think it set off a wave...

## The Guinea Grill

In London in the 1980s, Antony Worrall Thompson was serving beautiful, dainty food at *Ménage à Trois*, while well-heeled British people did their serious entertainment at The Guinea Grill. I felt if only these two things could be combined... Thus was born Amaya, the Indian grill [in Belgravia] serving seafood, meats and vegetables presented beautifully.

## Influences

I met some legendary chefs while travelling in Europe, who I invited to cook in The Taj kitchens, including Paul Bocuse. I also love Thai cuisine for its punchy flavours and I still visit Bangkok for inspiration. In Amaya, our salads have Thai influences.

## Stir-fried green and purple cabbage

Over the past few years I've been learning about the variety of Indian vegetables, and I decided to write a book on contemporary Indian vegetarian food [*Vegetables: the Indian Way*, is out later this month]. It spans many vegetables made in interesting ways, such as stir-fried shredded green and purple cabbage, sliced lotus root crisps and beetroot halwa.