

Some hot ideas on the menu

By updating the Indian restaurant formula with regional flavours, Masala World group has kept ahead of its rivals, says **Paul Tyrrell**

The term "Indian food" is "not very meaningful", says Ranjit Mathrani, co-founder of the London restaurant group Masala World. "India has 23 languages, hundreds of dialects and covers one-and-a-quarter million square miles. Comparing the cuisine of the Goan coast with that of Kashmir is like comparing the cuisine of Spain with that of Norway." By relying on regional dishes not commonly served in the UK, opening up-market and mid-market restaurants to capitalise on increasing demand and improved understanding of Indian food, and expanding aggressively, Masala World has won a host of awards and serves several hundred thousand diners a year. In 2005 it aims to reach turnover of £11.5m from £8m in the last financial year.

'Our recipes are from homes and palaces, and we train our chefs to use the most authentic techniques, with no short-cuts'

Mr Mathrani is speaking from Amaya, his flagship restaurant in London's Belgravia, which opened in October last year.

The style is recognisably Indian, with rosewood fittings, red sandstone wall tiles from Agra and terracotta sculptures from Bengal. Yet the atmosphere is far removed from that of a "traditional" Indian restaurant in the UK. It eschews velvet curtains and gloom in favour of angular minimalism and brightness, with floor-to-ceiling windows, a large skylight and colourful paintings from contempo-

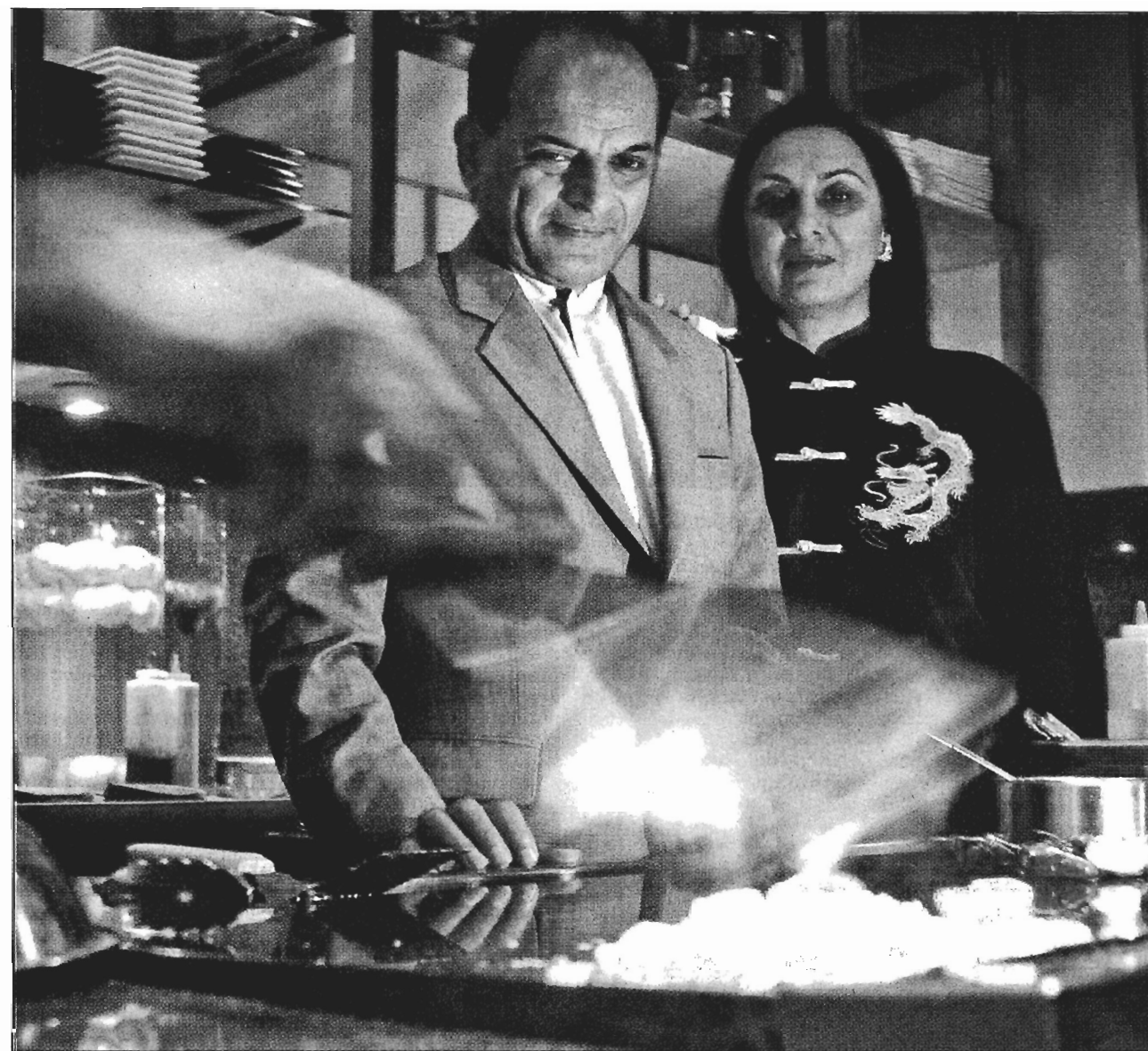
rary Indian artist Babu Xavier.

More surprising is the absence of curry from the menu. Amaya is marketed as an "Indian grill", with an open kitchen demonstrating the *sigri*, a coal or wood-burning stove, commonly used to flame-grill skewers of vegetables and meat; the *tawa*, a thick metal skillet, which produces a lighter heat suited to vegetables; and the *tandoor*, traditionally a large bread oven, but used in restaurants since the 1950s to cook meats.

Both critics and diners have responded enthusiastically: Amaya was named "Restaurant of the Year" and "New Restaurant of the Year" at the Tio Pepe ITV London Restaurant Awards in April – the first time either has been awarded to a non-European restaurant; it was also named London's "Top Newcomer" for 2006 by *Zagat*.

According to Mr Mathrani, "authenticity" has been the watchword at Masala World since the company was established in 1989. It was his wife Namita Panjabi who conceived their first restaurant, Chutney Mary, to "showcase gourmet foods from six to seven regions of India... with the rigorous philosophy that the foods of different regions could best be cooked by chefs from those regions".

Ms Panjabi previously held jobs in merchant banking, fashion and merchandising in India. Her sister, Camellia, who provided ideas in the initial stages and would later join Masala World as a director, worked for the Taj hotel group where, as marketing director, she established the Bombay Brasserie restaurant brand. Mr Mathrani worked for the Department of Trade and Industry for 17 years, then in banking as an international project finance specialist for Lazard, Standard Chartered and West LB,



Variety is the spice: Ranjit Mathrani with his wife Namith Panjabi at Amaya. The pair found success with more unusual Indian food Felix Clay

before forming his own corporate advisory firm. All three studied at Cambridge University in the 1960s.

"My role was that of facilitating and raising finance," Mr Mathrani says. "I knew Neville Abraham, the chairman of Chez Gerard, from the DTI, and he offered to bring in the front-of-house skills with us managing the culinary side; he was born in Bombay, and came over to the UK in 1957."

Mr Mathrani and his wife raised about 70 per cent of the £1m they needed to set up Chutney Mary from bank loans. Together with a group of friends, they provided the balance under the now-defunct Business Start-up Scheme, a forerunner to the government's Enterprise Investment Scheme. "Chez Gerard and ourselves had 26 per cent each and the private investors had 48 per cent," Mr Mathrani says.

Chutney Mary opened in Chelsea in 1990, with a menu that categorised each dish by its regional provenance. "Previously, UK diners had only really experienced food from a segment of north India," Mr Mathrani says. He introduced flavours of places such as Hyderabad, Manga-

lore and the Coromandel Coast.

He adds they were also experiencing, for the first time, a domestic style of preparation in a restaurant setting: "The best food in India is served in private or, occasionally, in back-street restaurants. Namita got our recipes from homes and palaces, and trained our chefs to cook using the most authentic techniques, with no short-cuts."

Perhaps the group's most demanding recipe is the Goan "xacutti" served at Chutney Mary. This curry contains chicken, coconut and 21 spices.

"Most Indian restaurants that claim to offer this recipe just grind all the spices together and throw them into the pot at the same time," observes Namita Panjabi. "We grind them one by one for a total of about three hours, then add them to the pot one by one for an hour and a half, according to their different roasting times."

In 1996, Mr Mathrani and his wife acquired for about £1m the 76 per cent stake in Masala World they did not own. A year later, they bought and revamped

Veeraswamy, reputed to be the oldest surviving Indian restaurant in the UK. Established in Piccadilly in 1926, Veeraswamy remained a big name in Indian food into the late 1970s, but then became something of a "non-entity", Mr Mathrani says.

Under Masala World it bounced back – with a region-orientated menu and a bright, contemporary revamp – winning the London *Time Out* award for "Best Indian Restaurant" within a year.

However, the Indian food sector was growing more competitive. Rival upmarket restaurants were beginning to open in London, and traditional family-run operations all over the country were losing sales to supermarket ready-meals, which had improved in terms of both quality and variety. "We began to see our recipes appearing on boxes at the supermarket with their regional provenance," Mr Mathrani says.

Masala World decided to regard this as an opportunity rather than a threat. The team reasoned that if the UK public was becoming

more sophisticated about Indian food, then price-sensitive diners could be lured to a mid-market version of the Masala World experience.

Thus, in 2001 they opened the first branch of Masala Zone, in Soho. It had a menu designed to overcome the perception of Indian food as "heavy" and therefore unsuitable for lunch, with an average meal priced at about £13. At its core was the "thali", a meal comprised of lots of small dishes, which would capitalise on the growing popularity of tasting menus among UK restaurant-goers.

Soon after, Camellia Panjabi joined Masala World full-time and John Lederer was recruited as operations director (he previously held the same position at Chez Gerard).

Masala Zone now has branches in Islington, which

THE INGREDIENTS FOR CULINARY SUCCESS

Masala World's "authenticity" is the building block of the business but has created challenges:

■ **Recruitment.** Good chefs specialising in Indian cuisine have recently been in short supply all over the world. Director Camellia Panjabi, who is based in Mumbai, travels around India regularly to source Masala World's key cooking staff and gather new recipes. She asks each potential chef to prepare a meal for her as a first assessment.

■ **Training.** Each new chef is trained by Namita and Camellia Panjabi in the use of western ingredients, whose properties can differ significantly from Indian equivalents if prepared incorrectly – this applies especially to spices but also to onions, tomatoes and other ingredients. Chefs must also, in some cases, adjust their cooking styles to suit the company's desire for domestic authenticity: "Someone who is used to cooking for public consumption will not have the same skills as someone who has spent many years cooking in a home or palace," Mr Mathrani says.

■ **Produce.** "We have to import rare spices such as fragrant cumin, sun-dried mango powder, lichen moss, cinnamon leaves and Karras flower, as well as other high-quality spices such as fresh chillies," Namita Panjabi says. However, as the quality of meat, poultry and fish in the UK is generally higher than in India, new chefs must be trained not to overcook it.

■ **Benchmarking.** The directors gather copious data from their businesses. Mr Mathrani explains: "We have weekly profit figures for each restaurant; we have variances of food, beverage, labour costs analysed against last year, last week and budget [and] we have nightly sales figures segmented by the number of covers, total turnover and average spend." Customer feedback is also gathered via incentivised comment cards.

■ **Location.** "A small family-run restaurant of 60-70 seats cannot afford to employ the full-time managers and specialist chefs we need," Mr Mathrani says. He is therefore looking for larger spaces for future outlets of Masala Zone.

opened in 2003, and Earls Court, which opened in April this year. It has a contemporary feel similar to that of Amaya, albeit a little less grand. "It is not a cookie-cutter environment," Mr Mathrani stresses. "We have made sure the visuals differ around a common idiom."

A recent report on Indian food in the UK, published by research firm Mintel, suggests the chain's approach should pay off. It says UK consumers increasingly want Indian meals that are smaller, lighter and "more authentic". The number of Indian restaurants remained fairly static between 2000 and 2005, but Mintel attributes this in part to "a failure to change and innovate" among independently owned, single-site businesses, which represent the vast majority of the UK's 8,000 outlets.

Masala Zone could face competition – especially at lunchtime – from the new Indian fast-food format pioneered by London-based chain Tiffinbites. But for the moment it is performing well.

In total, Masala World now employs about 250 people

and serves about 500,000 diners a year. Mr Mathrani predicts turnover will reach £11.5m in the current financial year as Amaya and Masala Zone Earls Court become more established.

Every Masala World restaurant since Chutney Mary has been financed out of group cash flow and bank borrowing, and Mr Mathrani says he intends to expand the Masala Zone chain further at a rate of three outlets per year.

"It's realistic in cash terms," he says. "It will just depend on finding the right locations, with good evening trade and reasonable potential for walk-in trade at lunchtime."

Furthermore, Veeraswamy is currently being revamped in a style befitting "luxury and sumptuousness of the 1920s", Mr Mathrani says. When it reopens at the end of October, it will have Moghul-style carpets, Indian granite and numerous chandeliers – "the same level of grandeur as the Raj era, without the same old clichés".

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