

Fascinated by market for masala

Nicholas Lander tracks an 'accidental' move from civil service to table service

Ranjit Mathrani seems far too well qualified to be a restaurateur. He holds degrees from Cambridge, Manchester, London and Delhi universities and spent 15 years in the highest echelons of the British civil service, dealing with the privatisation of several state industries, and a similar period as an investment banker before running his own corporate finance boutique.

Yet his decade in the restaurant business holds a particular fascination for him. "Restaurants are the free

market at its most simple and most basic," he explains. "You are dealing with customers who have the supreme freedom to come or not to come. You can't persuade, negotiate or manipulate the customer nor can you rely, as you do in government, on your skills of persuasion. There are no deals to be done in smoke-filled rooms - this is the survival of the fittest. What I've come to realise is that you can fool people more easily and for longer in politics than is possible in the restaurant business."

Over the past 10 years, Mathrani and his wife and



The flavours of success: Ranjit Mathrani and his wife Namita Panjabi at Masala World in London's Soho

Charlie Bibby

sister-in-law, Namita and Camellia Panjabi, have established the reputation of six of London's most respected restaurants serving Indian food - Chutney Mary, Veeraswamy, Amaya and three branches of Masala Zone. Masala World, the operating company, is a sleek, professional outfit with a staff of 250 generating sales of £15m a year.

As the softly spoken Mathrani talked about his time as a restaurateur, two themes became obvious. The first was

how he, like so many others, had fallen into the restaurant business by accident. The second was how important his role as an outsider had been in taking the Panjabi sisters' skills and directing them towards opening restaurants serving Indian food to meet an increasingly sophisticated market.

Reverting to the language of an investment banker, Mathrani explains his role in this triumvirate.

"I've always seen my job

as monetising the talents of the Panjabi family. When I married my wife, she was working successfully in design and fashion. Camellia, who was then with Taj Hotels, had opened the Bombay Brasserie in South Kensington.

"They wanted to open somewhere together and as we were looking at prospective sites I bumped into Neville Abraham, a former colleague in the civil service who had already gone into

the restaurant business with Café des Amis du Vin. When we found the site for Chutney Mary, we formed a joint venture in which we would provide the expertise on the food and design and they would provide the administrative and front-of-house managements".

Mathrani says Chutney Mary, where seven different chefs cook their regional dishes, has been important in the British appreciation of Indian food. The menu lists

the regional provenance of each dish and the proprietors try "to educate our customers that India is a continent made up of hugely diverse ingredients, tastes and spices and is far more complex than a single country".

Mathrani was drawn further into the restaurant business when he and the Panjabi sisters decided to buy out their partners and purchase and revive Veeraswamy, London's oldest Indian restaurant. But he wanted to cater for a wider market.

"The challenge I set Namita and Camellia was to create a concept that was no more expensive than the curry house but far more exciting. That is how Masala Zone came about. It combines the informal, colourful appeal of Indian street food with thalis, Indian family food. Thalis, where different dishes are served in separate bowls on a tray, seems to particularly appeal to the British desire for variety."

The financial discipline necessary to operate the three Masala Zones, where the average bill is around £13 per person for food and drink, appealed to Mathrani's instinct for detail, in contrast to the Panjabi's hitherto five-star world. It has also given him the opportunity to exert his influence on an area that was critical to him: service.

"In 2000 Namita suggested I go over to New York and look at how they looked after their customers and I was riveted by the informality, friendliness, hospitality and professionalism of the city's best practitioners. I returned determined to instil the same approach here and my idea was to do this by hiring students who are invariably bright, young, energetic and hungry."

This friendly approach was exemplified by the cheery young Bulgarian waitress who served us at a table next to the open kitchen at Amaya. Mathrani admits that the overwhelming popularity of the restaurant, opened in Belgravia two years ago and epitomising modern Indian design, style and cooking, took them all by surprise.

As the waitress delivered a sequence of light, flavourful dishes - scallops on a light herb sauce, tandoori broccoli, spiced grilled aubergine, quail in an apricot and ginger marinade and, my particular favourite, a Dori Kebab from Lucknow made from finely ground mince - Mathrani explains that he had had the idea for an Indian grill 10 years ago in response to two particular challenges.

"I could see that people were becoming more health-conscious, that there was a move away from sauce-based dishes, which is after all what a curry is. And secondly I wanted to create a menu that would break down the British aversion to eating Indian food at lunchtime."

Mathrani's plan over the next two years is to open another couple of Masala Zones. "I think the market is there and we have the structure to build not a chain but a group," he says. "There's an important distinction because that would mean for me that our core values - the cooking, the prices and the excitement - would remain constant."

Towards the end of our meal, Mathrani explains that it was the variety and complexity of his time as a restaurateur that most appealed to him. "I'm an intellectual magpie," he adds with a smile, "and I've come home to roost."

Full details of these restaurants on: www.realindianfood.com

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