

## The Panjabi Sisters Changing the Taste Buds of London

Namita and Camellia Panjabi have redefined the concept of Indian food served in all of their 10 restaurants in London. Path-breakers, they raised the bar, setting new standards for others to follow. *Chutney Mary*, *Veeraswamy*, *Amaya*, *Masala Zone*, all seven of them, are huge brands today and certainly England's crowning glory

Text & Photographs: **Farzana Contractor**

Namita and Camellia Panjabi did India a huge favour in changing perceptions in the western world and bringing to the fore what Indian cuisine truly is; vast, diverse, sophisticated, complex and very regional. Food that cannot be eaten in a mishmash manner. They have 10 restaurants in London, one more successful than the other with a workforce of over 500. Time to decorate the Panjabi sisters with a national award for showing India's true culinary face to the world, at large.

Quite literally, it was on her wedding stage that Namita Panjabi received the invitation to open an Indian restaurant in London. She was marrying Ranjit, a British Civil Service officer when his best friend, also the best man at the wedding, told Namita that he was born in Bombay, went to school at *Cathedral* and now had six French and Italian restaurants in London, AND he sorely missed and craved for the Indian food he grew up eating. If she ever decided to open an Indian restaurant, he had the back kitchen all ready for her! Namita, who at the time formed the first batch of women in merchant banking, was merchandising fashionware. She was purchasing goods for 60-odd top European departmental stores including *Harrods*, *Galeries Lafayette*, *Bloomingdale's* among others.

Moving to London soon after marriage where Ranjit, also a merchant banker was working for *Lazard*, Namita did take up his friend's offer, went into partnership and *Chutney Mary* was conceptualised in '89, opening its doors in '90 in Chelsea.

As luck would have it, the friend was going public with his other restaurants and was advised to disinvest his shares in *Chutney Mary*, which he did, and Ranjit and Namita



Camellia & Namita Panjabi  
at the *Spanish Suite*, Taj  
Mahal Palace, Mumbai



*Veeraswamy*, Regent Street



Great teamwork never fails

picked up his shares. A couple of years later, *Veerawamy* was up for sale and they bought this restaurant over, too, forcing Ranjit to give up his job and become a full-time restaurateur.

The ball had begun to roll.

It could not have been easy. London in those days was used to eating a mishmash of Indian food, they addressed as 'nosh'. And while it was good enough for them, eating the fare after they spilled out of pubs and went for some 'different' food, it wasn't for Ranjit and company. "For far too long, Bangladeshi restaurants had been contaminating palates based on dishes with expropriated Indian names!" says Ranjit in a restrained manner, in charming English accent.

Camellia, a force to reckon with in the culinary world, not exactly a hidden gem of the Taj Mahal Hotels was the one responsible in a big way for the success of its many restaurants all over India. With a total of 37 years with Tata, five at Bombay House and 32 at the Taj, Camellia, a marketing whiz, always knew food drives people. And now her sister was asking her to quit and join them.

The year was 2001 and Camellia did quit the Taj, sending tremors across the fault line. "Well, my mother was also not too well and I could not travel as much as I needed to. So I did leave Taj, but told Namita I would not shift to London, I would operate out of Bombay," says Camellia. And that is how it was. An operational system was worked out, the team now strengthened, went on to open a total of 10 restaurants. Here is the list... *Chutney Mary*, *Veerawamy*, *Amaya* and *Masala Zone*. Of the last mentioned there are seven: situated at Covent Garden, Soho, Earl's Court, Islington, Bayswater, Camden Town and Selfridges at Oxford Street. No mean task in just a little over 25 years.

I had very many interesting conversations about their eventful and enjoyable culinary journey in London at their different restaurants, in car rides as we drove through London, in Bombay, at the photoshoot which was in the *Spanish Suite* at the Taj, at their home, whenever we bumped into each other at social dos. For whenever Namita, Camellia and I meet, the discussions are almost always food, recipes, ingredients, chefs, restaurants – not necessarily theirs. They are wonderful, the

Panjabi sisters are.

I was curious to know why the name *Chutney Mary*? I mean, as a Bombay person and a convent educated girl, I am fully aware of the terms Sandra from Bandra, Byculla Boy, as much as Chutney Mary (we used to tease our Anglo Indian friends so), but applying it to a restaurant, I had to know the full import.

So Namita enlightened, "In 1983 when Camellia was instrumental in opening the *Bombay Brasserie* for the Taj, in London, things changed. Glamour and grandeur was brought to Indian food, for the first time in the British capital. But even in those days what did people do? They went out, ordered a *rogan josh*, *makhani*, a Goan prawn curry, some rice. They would spoon some steamed rice in the middle of the plate and then serve themselves a spoon of each of these curries. And say, 'Fantastic'. But was it?"

"We know," says Camellia taking over, "that Indian food cannot be ate like that. We can't mix up all these varied tastes. No Indian would. But the locals had to be told so. And that is what Namita and Ranjit did. It was quite a battle, educating and being at it hammer and tong!"

"Every time I was on BBC, or talking to journalists or British friends, I would extoll on the nuances of Indian cuisine," adds Namita. "It's a complex cuisine, vast and varied and very regional, I would explain. We don't mix our foods. India can be compared to all of Europe. 'Would you take some *paella*, *Cog au Vin* and *Beef Bourguignon* in one plate and eat that up, I would question?' No, the French chef would scream it was a sacrilege! Likewise the Indian cuisine can be subtle and sophisticated or fiery and rich, vastly different in taste from the north to the south, east to west."

Which is why when they launched *Chutney Mary*, they thought it through. Right from the name. *Chutney* which is universal to all of India and can be found in every home, symbolising a *desi* taste. And *Mary*, this simple girl who was now turning glamorous; cutting her hair, going dancing! She was now polished enough to say, 'Hey, I can converse with you!' *Chutney Mary* was going to offer Indian fare to the Westerner in a language they understood. They were going to present plated Indian food, beautifully, dramatically. Not like a blob



Amaya's interiors are a class apart



Chutney Mary is homely elegance at its best



The vibrant bar at Masala Zone



Smiles to go and many more restaurants to follow



The simple Masala Zone Bhel

of brown sauce, or a swimming pool of a deep dish that you went fishing in for prawns or the meat pieces! Their food would look beautiful and it would be plated. The Brits and the rest like unobtrusive service, serve and leave them alone. And that is how they planned to do it.

And it worked! *Chutney Mary*, very chic and elegant, became a success. Being recognised and awarded is good, but having Princess Anne hop across Buckingham Palace (now that *CM* is situated in St. James Street) is better, methinks. And actually being invited to cater at the palace alongside the Buckingham chefs for an evening function celebrating the 75th Independence Day of India, rather an honour.

*Veeraswamy* in Regent Street is also adorned with a Michelin. Established in 1926, it is UK's oldest Indian restaurant offering classical cuisine from across many regions, with food preparations based on those cooked in palaces of Indian maharajas and other



Nalli Barra at Amaya



Pav Bhaji at Masala Zone



The grand thali at Masala Zone



Veeraswamy's famed Duck Vindaloo

gourmet homes. No wonder the décor is opulent, in keeping with the theme. If I have to pick some of the dishes from north, south, east and west at this eatery, it would have to be; *Pistachio Chicken*, *Travancore Prawn Curry*, *Roast Duck Vindaloo* and *Chorchori* which is mixed vegetables from Bengal.

*National Geographic* has sensibly picked *Veeraswamy* as one of the World's 10 Best Special Restaurants.

As for *Masala Zone*, what can one say? This chain of restaurants has revolutionised how Indian food can be mixed and matched.

The menus are thoughtfully put together, the plating is unique (never know *bhel puri* could be made to look so attractive), the décor astounding. The one I ate at, had hundreds of Rajasthani puppets dangling from the ceiling casting a warm saffron glow, the predominant colour of the puppets' finery. It takes a good combination of zeal and aesthetic sense to achieve such finesse.

*Amaya* came about in an interesting fashion. Neither Camellia, nor Namita and Ranjit, were planning on opening a new restaurant when this awesome site in Halkin

Arcade was offered to them. By who? By three absolutely successful and wealthy financial tycoons who, as young school boys-friends would visit cafés in this area in their youth, who had now bought over the entire street. So keen were they to have an Indian restaurant there, they offered the place to our hard-working and lucky trio without rent for one whole year. Camellia immediately knew what kind of restaurant would work, what the Britishers were ready for. Her mind went into overdrive and together they dipped into their food memories sniffing at the smokey wafts



Standing tall, the women who made it all

of aromas emanating from *tandoors* and grills, *tamas* and *sigdis*. It had to be a grill place with an open kitchen which would let diners look, see, feel, even touch if they so wanted!

*Amaya* opened in October 2004 at Motcomb Street, where fashionable Knightsbridge meets elegant Belgravia. It became an instant success, picking up a Michelin star ever since 2006, among many other awards, and has Bollywood stars without bookings, waiting for tables.

The night I dined there, with hosts Namita and Ranjit and local friends Barbara and Hira Sehgal was indeed memorable. The

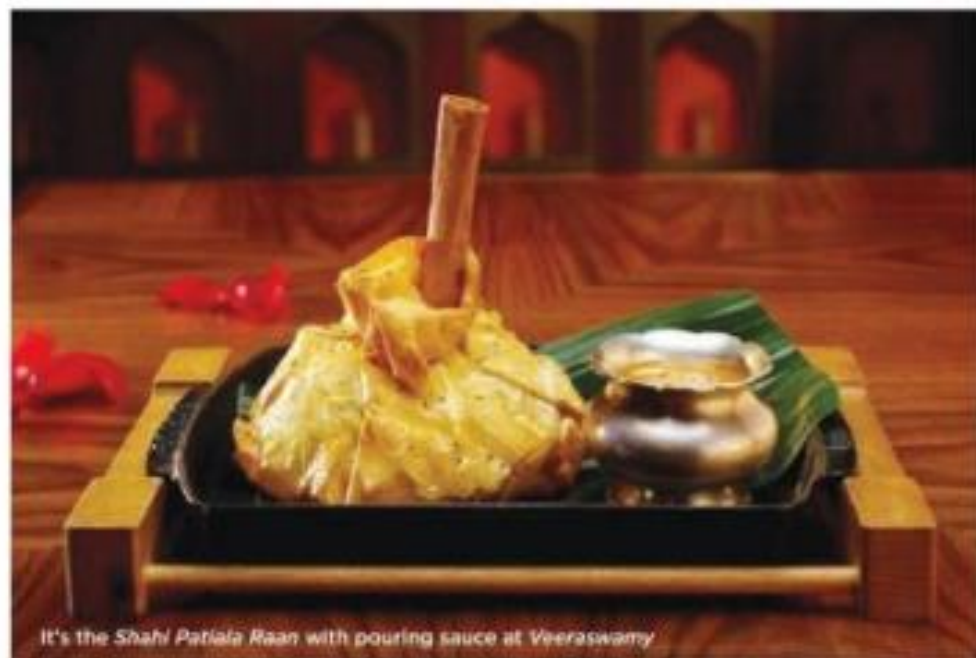
restaurant was packed, buzzing with happy people and happy sounds, the clinking of glasses, the sizzling of grills, celebrations were happening and wonderful music playing on, even as the very dramatic lighting cast illusionary shadows.

Do I know what I drank? No, Ranjit took care of the champagne and the wine, matching it perfectly with every course. Do I remember what I ate? Of course I do! *King Scallops* griddled in a light green sauce. *Smoked Chilli Lamb Chops*, *Tandoori Fete Gras*, *Grilled Wild Jumbo Madagascan Prawn* and *Char Grilled Aubergine*. Sure there were other vegetables but it's not something you care for when the non veg options are so tempting!

Weeks after this very satisfying dinner, I found myself sitting with Camellia at *Shamiana* at Taj, Bombay. We were dissecting various *biryani* recipes when I popped the question to her, "How fulfilling has your journey been so far and does it go on?" "I have to concede," said Camellia "putting together the last restaurant, *Amaya*, was very exciting. We travelled the length and breadth of the country sourcing materials, recipes, meeting people in the world of food. So my passion gets addressed, and that is very rewarding, very fulfilling. Yes, I can say I am happy with all that I have done after I left Taj. But there is always the yearning to do more, something else, something new, so who knows..."



Chutney Mary's Tokri Chaat



It's the Shahi Patiala Raan with pouring sauce at Veeraswamy