



"I'VE REALISED THAT I AM NOT COOKING FOR INDIANS ANY MORE: I AM COOKING FOR THE BRITISH."

raise the average drink spend, but also by the desire to match the subtle spices and textures of new-wave Indian cooking with something more interesting than a pint of lager. It is a tangible sign of how much Indian food has grown up that the top Indian restaurants – Rasoi, Benares, Amaya and Tamarind, to name but a few – now employ sommeliers: in the past, anyone with a bottle opener would have done.

The dining public in London is much more educated now, too. The food of India is made up of dozens of different cuisines, as varied in their ingredients and techniques as European cuisine, a fact which curry-house cuisine, an ersatz version of northern Indian cooking, often prepared by Bangladeshis, conveniently ignores. London now boasts excellent southern Indian restaurants (try Rasa, in Stoke Newington, or Quilon, near Victoria), Goan restaurants (Ma Goa, in Putney and Fulham), even a Gujarati/East African restaurant: Kastoori, in Tooting. Even 'pan-Indian' restaurants cook regional dishes properly now, often giving chefs from different parts of India the chance to spotlight their own cuisines.

Where does Indian food go now? There are some signs that upmarket Indian restaurants are starting to make an impact outside London – Dilli, in Altrincham, set up by Kuldeep Singh, who owns London restaurants Mela and Chowki, is a good example – and there are also an increasing number of cheaper, 'diffusion range' restaurants springing up. Masala Zone, with several London outlets, is the brainchild of the Panjabi sisters and Namita's husband Ranjit, while The Urban Turban, Vineet Bhatia's new venture, opens in west London this month, serving Indian street food in an informal atmosphere. Imli, on Wardour Street, is an offshoot of Tamarind, again giving Indian food a less formal showcase than its illustrious parent.



Atul Kochhar

All of these are aimed at a market which likes Indian food (the majority of the population, probably), but would rather eat informally – and spend less money – than at swankier places. The food at all of them is noticeably fresher and healthier than at old-style curry houses: while Indian food is not inherently unhealthy – the rice and dal on which much of India exists is nutritious and low in fat – the mutation served in curry houses is often ruinously oily and salty. Modern sensibilities to diet have led to a new wave of cheap, cheerful and well-balanced menus which have kept the spice but, for the most part, lost the fat. Fashionable micro-salads adorn plates now, while fish, yogurt and fresh fruit are all given far more prominence than was once the case.

Atul Kochhar's next venture is perhaps the most interesting: next year, he plans to open a restaurant in the middle of an English vineyard. Wickham Vineyards, in Hampshire, make a range of English wine: the sort of wines that should go rather well with Indian food. It is difficult to think

of a less traditional setting for Indian cuisine than a vineyard in the middle of the English countryside, but, as Kochhar says, "I've realised that I am not cooking for Indians any more: I am cooking for the British."

We Britons, needless to say, are not excessively concerned about authenticity, even if we understand the traditions of Indian cuisine. What we want is flavoursome, exciting, freshly-cooked food, made from high-quality ingredients, and cooked with an eye for seasonality and good local produce. And we still love a bit of spice.