

LONDON SPICE

THE HUMBLE CURRY HAS LONG BEEN BRITAIN'S ADOPTED NATION DISH BUT NOW THE TANDOORI HAS TURNED CHIC. WE EXPLORE LONDON'S GOURMET INDIAN RESTAURANTS.

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Spices at Brilliant



Chilli lobster at Rasoi

The British love going for curry, and this is reflected in over 8,000 Indian restaurants dotted throughout the land, with London, in particular, being a mecca for connoisseurs of Indian cuisine. In recent years, many Indian restaurants have eschewed the traditional image of flock wallpaper, silver bowls of curry swimming in oil, and lager, in favour of designer interiors and fusion cuisine combining the best of sub-continental cooking with the qualities of European restaurant traditions. Now some Indian eateries are top-end Michelin-starred restaurants. Here's five favourites to spice up your next London visit:

*tantalising aromas
of spices
waft down...*

BRILLIANT

After more than 30 years, the Brilliant, run by the Anand family, continues to accumulate accolades including The British Curry Award's *Best Indian Restaurant in the London Suburbs 2007/8*, and the only Indian restaurant in the United Kingdom to receive a special recognition in *The Good Food Guide*.

Inside, the look is cool and tasteful; plasma screens show Bollywood films, and turbaned waiters dressed in crisp black attire glide around with inimitable ease. Princess Diana dined here, so has Prince Charles, numerous prime ministers (Blair, Major, Heath) and a multitude of Bollywood stars.

Although the Brilliant specialises in Punjabi food, drawing largely from Northern India, many of the dishes have a uniquely East African twist, such as the *Jeera chicken* cooked and served on the bone that reflects the Anand's family's journey to Britain via Kenya. The newly introduced healthier options (using less oil), like ▶



tandoori salmon, prawns and fish, crisp vibrantly spiced onion bhajis, and terrific paper-thin Romali bread add to the overall experience. “What we cook here is exactly what I would eat at home, and it’s very authentic. We source and utilise local produce as much as possible and everything on the premises is made from scratch including the chutneys and pickles,” says owner Mr Gulu Anand. “Recently we’ve started a campaign called ‘Just Ask’ (which shows how food gets from farm to fork), with Prince Charles being a keen supporter.” Do whatever it takes to get to Southall, to visit this top-notch Indian. Simply put, the Brilliant lives up to its name.

VEERASWAMY

United Kingdom’s oldest surviving Indian restaurant (established 1926) has recently been restored to reflect the glamour and glory it exuded in the 1920s. The luxurious, chic and exotic interior features rich Indian coloured glass shades (handis), splendid chandeliers, candle stands, optical fibre lighting and illuminated backdrops. Vividly coloured turbans belonging to the Indian Maharajas who frequented the restaurant in the early years are displayed on the walls and silvered jali screens provide tantalising visual perspectives.

A menu of classical dishes from throughout India are served alongside more modern creations, with some dishes seldom seen in Britain such as *Raj Kachori*, *Lamb Khichada*, *Oyster Kebabs*, *Fish Paturi*, *Vegetable Chorchori*, and *Lobster Tandoori*. There are also a variety of seafood dishes from India’s coastal settlements, with seafood options originating from Mangalore in the West, Cochin in the South and Bengal in the East. Desserts are contemporary versions of Indian sweet dishes, for

example *Chocolate Kulfi*, *Galub Jamun* and homemade *Rasgollas*.

The list of celebrity diners is as endless as the exotic menus that have so skilfully kept pace with the passage of time, including Winston Churchill, Mahatma Gandhi, Charlie Chaplin, Laurence Olivier and Marlon Brando. More recently, Mia Farrow, Princess Anne, Sharon Stone and Pierce Brosnan have become aficionados of the Veeraswamy.

CINNAMON CLUB

As you walk up Great Smith Street towards the Cinnamon Club, located in a former Victorian library, tantalising aromas of spices waft down on the breeze making the discreet entrance easier to locate. The cool understated interior has the feel of a grand colonial club, and everything from the crisp white linens, lofty ceilings, and gallery of bookshelves to the £100-a-throw cinnamon-coloured calfskin menus expresses comfort, discretion and affluence.

“The British have always loved their curries, but we launched the Cinnamon Club in 2001 with a view to changing people’s perceptions of Indian food,” says head chef Vivek Singh, who prior to his appointment here worked at the luxury hotel Oberoi Rajvilas, in Jaipur. “What we have here is a modern up-market Indian restaurant in a unique building. It has a clean, simple minimalist design with splashes and suggestions of India and this translates into our cuisine.”

The Cinnamon Club is the Indian of choice for Westminster power brokers, politicians and big-business types, who enjoy Singh and his crack team of 18 chef’s distinctive knack of layering flavours, combined with stunning presentation. The menu changes often with pre- and post-theatre menus also available. ▶



INDIA CLUB

A welcome escape from the hustle and bustle of the Strand, this classic café-style Indian could have stepped right from the times of the Raj. Clamber up two flights of red linoleum steps, follow the arrows and you enter the charmingly eccentric India Club, which has remained much the same since it opened in 1947. Most of the features and furniture of the restaurant have incredibly survived intact. Think photos of Gandhi and the Independence era on the walls, bottle-green leather chairs, pegboard menu and wooden laminate tabletops with upturned glasses, a water jug and salt-and-pepper pots. Inside, London businessmen and students rub shoulders with customers from Indian High Commission enjoying the hearty and affordable South Indian fare.

"This is one of the best kept secrets in London and it's great value," says author and India Club regular Michael Hickey whose been coming here for the last 40 years for his favourite *Lamb Madras* washed down with a Cobra beer.

RASOI RESTAURANT

Rasoi is the shared dream of Vineet Bhatia, long considered one of Britain's most talented Indian chefs and his wife Rashima. Their 100-year-old Chelsea town house turned restaurant opened in June 2004 to much critical acclaim, and all the hard work paid off when in January 2006 it was awarded that much-coveted star by the Michelin Guide.

At Rasoi you have the impression of being invited to the home of a very chic, fashionable and talented chef, a feeling intensified by having to ring the doorbell to enter. Customised and designed by Rashima, the décor is lush and sensual. Lots of stunning Kashmiri rugs, vibrant saris framing the windows, ceramic Indian tribal facemasks, silk cushions and several bells specially sourced from South Indian temples, hang throughout the restaurant.

Balanced and sophisticated use of spices mark Vineet's cooking and he scores highly by innovatively giving traditional Indian cuisine a unique and contemporary twist with signature eats such as; *Tamarind and cumin glazed quails*, *Ginger and chilly lobster dusted with cocoa* and *Chocomosamosas filled with marbled chocolate*. "I only have one proviso," says Vineet, "that each dish has to be amazing." ■

LUXE LIST

Brilliant: 72-76 Western Road, Southall, Middlesex.

+44 20 8574 1928, www.brilliantrestaurant.com

Veeraswamy: Victory House, 99 Regent Street, London.

+44 20 7734 1401, www.veeraswamy.com

Cinnamon Club: The Old Westminster Library, 30-32 Great Smith Street, London.

+44 20 7222 2555, www.cinnamonclub.com

India Club: Second Floor, 143 Strand, London.

+44 20 7836 0650.

Rasoi Restaurant: 10 Lincoln Street, Chelsea.

+44 20 7225 1881, www.rasoirestaurant.co.uk

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