

Elettaria - New York Indian

15 Nov 2008 by Nick Lander/FT

Although the contents of the menu at Elettaria, the Indian- influenced restaurant opened by chef Akhtar Nawab and two partners earlier this year in New York's West Village, are highly impressive, the menu itself could not be less convenient for restaurant reviewers.

It is nothing less than a small hardback in which elegant drawings of herbs and spices are intermingled with pages listing the various courses and wines by the glass. These menus are obviously expensive to produce which would make it invidious to slip one, however surreptitiously, into a pocket, even if this could be accomplished relatively easily.

And yet holding on to the menu is, alongside a small notebook, a pen and a roving eye – as well of course as a good appetite – the most reliable method of recalling precisely what has been enjoyed. The internet can obviously be a boon after the event but menus change more frequently than most restaurants' websites, so taking the menu, either openly or not, is always my policy. And I am not alone. One former New York writer used to insist that any female companion had to bring a large handbag into which the menu could be stashed away under the table.

But over a fascinating meal, and a subsequent conversation with Nawab, I was to discover that this menu design is not the only unusual step he has taken to creating a distinctive restaurant that I hope will prosper.

The first, and most obvious, is its name. Elettaria is Latin for green cardamom, Nawab explained to me almost 40 years after my last classics lesson, although it was something of a second choice. "Our daughter is called Ella and I wanted to name it after her. But that name was taken so my partner suggested Elettaria as an alternative. And it appears to be memorable which is important," Nawab explained.

More significant perhaps has been his choice of location and building. Elettaria is situated in a part of town previously best known as an area for the music business (rather like the recently opened Giaconda Dining Room in London) and the restaurant was formerly a club where Jimi Hendrix once played. But, crucially for Nawab, it had never been a restaurant before.

"This was the most important criterion for me when we were looking for a site. In most instances new restaurants rise out of the ashes of previous ones and this does make good financial sense because a lot of the expensive infrastructure is in the right place. But I wanted to start from scratch, to build something new and different, something fresh on the block," he explained.

Nawab did acknowledge, however, that by installing an open kitchen at the far end of the restaurant he was treating it rather like the stage when the building was a club. But what is most intriguing about the restaurant's interior is the contrast between the industrial nature of the kitchen and the comfortable, rather homey feel that surrounds the bar and tables.

The front part of the restaurant is made up of exposed white brickwork, velvet curtains, mirrors and table lamps along the walls that make it look rather sophisticated. The far end of the room includes the large kitchen range behind which half a dozen chefs toil while Nawab occupies the area just in front.

There is no attempt to hide what's going on. The rice cooker is obvious while just to the right is a microwave which heats the flat bread which they serve with raita, that moreish blend of yoghurt, cucumber, mint and coriander. And while it is also clearly possible to watch the chefs drinking and nibbling away at the odd bit of food, it is more exciting to watch Nawab as he patrols his domain with two kitchen cloths attached to his apron, implements which any chef in his position uses almost maniacally to wipe the rims of the plates clean before they are whisked away.

On the night we visited the kitchen was calm and relatively quiet despite the presence of a photographer in the kitchen and a spill that brought a porter with a mop and bucket to the fore, although Nawab admitted that this very public exposure every night did sometimes test his composure.

Nawab, 36, was born in the US to Indian parents and grew up in Milwaukee and Kentucky before moving to New York to cook for what he described as his 'formative years' at Gramercy Tavern and Craft restaurants. India remains, in his words, 'the template for my cooking' but he has also obviously learnt how to incorporate a broad range of spices, which in all instances were used relatively mildly, alongside more mainstream American ingredients.

The best examples of this modern approach in the first courses were samosas stuffed with curried rabbit, coconut and tamarind; crab meat resala with gnocchi and turmeric; and his take on pork ribs, an ingredient not widely seen in India. These had been marinated in his blend of garam masala spices overnight before steaming and were juicy if almost too hot to eat with one's hands. The cucumber relish served with them was a clever, cooling addition.

A distinctive ingredient in a main course of halibut with a confit of fingerling potatoes and pea leaves was dried lime powder which Nawab adds to the fish once it has been cooked. This, he believes, adds the appropriate level of acidity most white fish require but without the extra liquid that the normal squeeze of lemon or lime would leave behind. A starter of finely diced squid with cauliflower, a pickled ginger and carrot vinaigrette and coco beans, steamed rice cakes and lentils all demonstrated good technique and exuded freshness.

The desserts, made by a young female Ecuadorean pastry chef under Nawab's guidance, incorporate a broad range of spices without losing sight of the American sweet tooth. The same care has also gone into seeking out the wines to bring out the best of all these flavours, an approach that accentuated the pleasure of the evening. A most unusual Hungarian white varietal wine, a 2006 Kreinbacher Birtok Juhfark at US \$50, was a fine compliment to the food, although Elettaria's policy of buying only a couple of cases of each wine at a time so that they can rotate the list weekly may mean it is not available for long.

Having survived the initial six months, the most difficult time for any restaurant, Nawab seems only too aware that he now faces unforeseen challenges from the current recession which will test his customers' spending power and his ability to deliver that essential ingredient, value for money. But beneath the genial and rather relaxed exterior, Nawab exudes the essential determination to succeed – come what may.

Elettaria, 33 West 8th Street at Macdougall Street, New York 10011. Phone, 212-677-3833. www.elettarianyc.com Open for dinner 7 nights and at the weekends for lunch.