

## Traditional Punjabi at the Gaylord

15 Nov 2012 by Nick Lander FT

The silence that normally ensues immediately after dinner guests have been introduced to one another lasted barely a second on this occasion.

Instead, a tall, dark-haired, attractive and, I was soon to learn, highly opinionated Indian woman ensured that the conversation flowed. And she had us all laughing when she set out the differences in timing between the dinner parties she attends in her native Delhi and those in her husband's home town of Copenhagen.

'At home the invitation may say 8 pm but that is when we start drinking. We don't eat before 10.30 pm. But by then, everyone in Copenhagen is tucked up in bed', she explained, roaring with laughter.

I subsequently enquired about her favourite Indian restaurant in London and the response was immediate. 'When I have a particular craving for a few desi foods, we always go to the Gaylord. Many of my more fashionable and/or weight-conscious Indian friends wouldn't agree but I think their food can be 'bilkul' (absolutely) delicious.'

The name Gaylord resonated. It had been their branch in Manchester (now closed) that had introduced me to Indian food and, in turn, to numerous conversations around the table with the tall, swarthy waiters over our mutual hero, the Indian cricketer Farokh Engineer then playing for Lancashire.

The conditions were certainly Mancunian as I stood opposite the Mortimer Street site that has been home to the Gaylord in London since 1966. Heavy rain was falling; the road was full of puddles; and steam was rising across the restaurant's large windows.

Compensation lay, however, in the pungent, dry, distinctive aromas of Indian cooking that are now, after 46 years, very much a part of the Gaylord's particular microclimate. And, as I was soon to learn, this is precisely the right time of the year to indulge in the rich, Punjabi food that the Gaylord specialises in, 'to fatten one up for the cold, winter months ahead', as my Indian friend was to describe it.

As I walked in, I began to experience another particular aspect of life in an Indian restaurant. Nobody rushed to greet me. Once I had sat down nobody rushed over with a wine list or menu. The drinks we ordered did not arrive all that promptly and, once we had all been seated, handed menus and had time to look at them, the Gaylord's portly general manager, Sameer Berry, stood very patiently by our table, with an air of polite disinterest on his face. He displayed no urgency at all in taking our order.

Noticing my disquiet, our Indian friend explained with a smile, 'The waiting staff here know that we Indians are going to take so much time discussing what we are going to eat that there is absolutely no point in trying to rush us. There is, I reckon, more debate among Indians about their food than even among gourmets at a top French restaurant.'

While she quizzed Berry in Hindi about a couple of dishes, I sat back on the banquette and watched another ritual of everyday life in an Indian restaurant as several men walked in for their takeaway or, to use the colloquial Indian phrase, 'make a pack'.

My thoughts about how much this aspect must contribute to any Indian restaurant's profitability were interrupted by a brisk summary of the conversation with Berry. While she, as a Hindu, had ordered only vegetarian dishes - 'what I would order if I was here with my friends from Delhi', she explained - her Danish husband had added a few meaty ones.

In authentic Indian style, we were skipping the first courses, too heavy for the main courses I was told, and we would all share the main courses at the same time. And, because we had ordered so much, Berry wanted us to move to a larger, round table with a 'lazy Susan' in the middle.

Just before the food arrived, I was introduced to two other aspects of Indian hospitality. The first, and more general, came via the phrase 'your guest comes as a god'. The second, and more specific, came via the order for saffron mutter pulao, ie basmati rice with cumin seeds, peas and saffron. 'My mother told me never to serve plain rice to guests', she

recalled. 'It's not special enough and your self respect comes from how you treat your guests.'

The food arrived promptly and in a panoply of colours. There was the dark brown of the dal bukhara, black lentils that had been cooked with lots of butter and finished with cream which we mopped up with bhatura, soft, unleavened bread that puffs up like a pillow. There was my introduction to channa peshwari, spicy chick peas, and crisp bhindi, a plate of darkgreen diced okra, as well as roomali roti, the thin bread cooked on the outside of the griddle and then folded so that it takes the name of 'handkerchief bread'. My Indian friend enhanced the inherent spiciness of all these dishes by nibbling from a side plate of grilled green chilis.

With keema matar (minced lamb and coriander), excellent renditions of paneer (cubes of fresh cheese cooked in the tandoor), rogan josh (a hot lamb curry), kulfi and rasmalai, the very sweet Indian desserts, and two bottles of Weingut Balthasar Röss, Hattenheimer Schützenhaus Riesling Kabinett 2011, my bill for four came to £220.

**Gaylord Restaurant** 79-81 Mortimer Street, London W1W 7SJ0; tel 020 7636 0808, [www.gaylordlondon.com](http://www.gaylordlondon.com)