

ON A HUNT FOR THE REAL INDIA

MY LATEST idea for a best-seller on diet and healthy eating is Eat the Food from Where You Were Born. I have come back from two weeks travelling in India – I was born in the northern state of Uttarakhand – where I ate ferociously (far more than I do here), felt terrific and put on scarcely a pound in weight. What I wanted to eat when I got back was Indian food. I do see that it might have been different if I hailed from South Shields. But diet books rarely have a sensible premise.

Fortunately, during the time I was away a new Indian restaurant opened in Islington while in Camden there is a recently launched branch of a favourite Bloomsbury Indian place that for some time I have been meaning to review.

Chefs I spoke to in India were vocal and vehement about how Indian food in London bears no resemblance to the real thing. They have a point but with a bit of encouragement praise came for fellow Oberoi and Taj hotel-trained chefs such as Vineet Bhatia (Rasoi), Sriram Aylur (Quilon), Karunesh Khanna (Amaya), Manoj Vasaikar (Indian Zing) and Atul Kochhar (Benares). In India there seemed to be no awareness of the appearance in London of excellent modest places such as Delhi Grill in Chapel Market, where you can eat almost as you might at a dhaba (roadside truck stop), and Mooli's in Soho, which serves rotis rolled around delectable fillings prepared by Raju Rawat, a chef who worked at Benares in Berkeley Square.

Harsh Joshi, director and front-of-house at Roots at N1, has also worked at Benares, as did his head chef Bhola Kunwar, but this time the diaspora is to a converted corner pub in the part of Islington called Barnsbury. Only the ground floor is given over to dining. A curved brown banquette in what might be called leatherene embraces the tables, some of which have a view into the open kitchen.

The menu is thrillingly short. Ten savoury dishes, six of them offered at two sizes/prices, comprise the main thrust followed by five side dishes and four desserts. Compounding this deliberate aberration was an absence of

Fay Maschler



RESTAURANTS OF THE WEEK

ROOTS AT N1

★★★★☆

115 Hemingford Road N1 (020 7697 4488) Tues-Sat 6pm-10pm (6pm-9pm Sun). A meal for two with wine, about £80 excluding service.

poppadums and chutneys to fill the quite long wait before any food appeared. "They're half the fun," muttered Reg mournfully. He was not much consoled by an amuse-bouche of tomato soup flavoured with cardamom, clove and cinnamon, more Asian Heinz than lovely restorative rasam.

Tandoor-roasted vegetables and baby leaves dressed with aged balsamic might be classified as Indian nouvelle cuisine and might have worked had the produce been seared rather than damply sautéed, and were the vinegar less overpowering. Fennel and peppered deep-fried squid rings with pickled red cabbage were only glancingly Indian but maybe that was the point.

Chicken tikka masala is described as "the real thing" but since the dish is a British construct it seems a meaningless accolade for a pleasant but unedifying assembly. Much better is seared sea bass with curried squash and a creamy coconut sauce. Breads, a selection of three, are fine and so is kulfi (iced reduced milk) in flavours of mango and pistachio. Harsh, who has worked at The Ritz, is keen on wine matchings but the Viognier runs out after one glass.

Roots at N1 has the engaging feel of someone's determination to do his own thing but there seems to have been insufficient investment for any heating to be installed. Last week the evening chill plus noise bouncing off hard surfaces made it difficult to be more than dutifully encouraging.



DANNY ELWES

Heat in the kitchen: head chef Bhola Kunwar at Roots at N1

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