

# Telegraph

## Restaurant review: Vatika

**Upmarket Indian in a plain outbuilding conquers the wilds of Hampshire. Jasper Gerard visits Vatika, in Shedfield, Southampton**

If the passage to India was tortuous, the passage from India has been more painful still. Dr Aziz, the misunderstood Indian of EM Forster's novel, was treated with suspicion by the British of the subcontinent; and if anything, Indian restaurants colonising Britain faced even greater snobbery. It was just assumed they were more John Smith than Veuve Clicquot.



Modern British with an Indian twist: dishes available at Vatika, in Shedfield, Southampton

"Having an Indian" meant buckets of vindaloo and barrels of beer: think Keith Talent, the Martin Amis anti-hero in London Fields, who abused waiters for not putting enough chillies in his curry while smoke bellowed from his ears.

It was unfair: for just as Britain left a fine architectural and administrative legacy in India, so India's gift to Britain was to transform every provincial high street from culinary desert to fertile landscape for edible food.

For many years you could count the number of posh Indians in London on the digits of one finger. From its opening in 1926, Veeraswamy served everyone from Edward, Prince of Wales, to Charlie Chaplin. We had to wait till 1990 before Indian food was taken seriously, with the arrival of Veeraswamy's sister restaurant, Chutney Mary. Now, posh Indians have

usurped peasant French as the food of smart sorts.

One of my more surreal dinners was taken while perching on a bed in an Indian restaurant in Mayfair. Gimmickry aside, some Indians are magnificent. Rasoi Vineet Bhatia, hidden in a discreet Chelsea town house, is a gem. And then there is the empress of the growing Veeraswamy empire, Amaya, a fantastic, funky Knightsbridge establishment where you might eat delectable lobster or crab streaked with the subtlest curry sauce. In the unlikely event that you've ever wondered what a restaurant critic does on his day off, you now know: he eats at Amaya. Hell, I'd dine from its dustbin.

This decidedly metropolitan creature, the posh Indian, seems to have journeyed everywhere, bar the provinces of Britain. Until now. Yes, it has finally made its regal progress out of the City, like a maharaja driving through the dusty lanes to Simla in his open top Rolls-Royce. Even in my nearby town of Edenbridge, Kent, the self-styled Quality Tandoori is chic, minimalist and frankly too good for us locals.

Now Atul Kochhar, who along with Vineet Bhatia was the first Indian to win a Michelin star in 2001, has gone further. After winning another star at Benares in Mayfair, he has just opened an upmarket contemporary restaurant in a vineyard in Hampshire, with head chef Jitin Joshi at the helm. So will subcontinental cuisine prove as socially mobile in the wild jungles beyond Southampton as it has in London?

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Vatika is in a plain outbuilding decorated entirely in grey, including three stunning chandeliers shaped like wagon wheels and stacks of bottles from the vineyard. Diana finds the grey elegant and at least there is little to distract us from the food. Strictly this is not Indian but "modern British with an Indian twist". The brief menu offers no curries, though Vatika does cater for a few Keith Talents.

You realise this place takes itself seriously when bread arrives - with different salts in test tubes. So many amuse-bouches arrive it isn't funny. Creamy tubes of chicken liver pâté wrapped in filo pastry are the highlight. Service is meticulous, if slow. Delighted as we are to have water poured from jugs gratis, it is an hour before we take delivery of our starters.

Eventually Diana enjoys pigeon and beetroot infused with vanilla and Indian five spice. This comes with a miniature pot of jellied consommé, adding sweetness to the tender bird which is marinated in a tandoor; very accomplished. Not so my monkfish and cucumber: it has all the succulence of an old tyre after a hard life pounding the M25.

But my concerns are blown away by the main courses, particularly Diana's, which I steal: shoulder of lamb, cooked for 24 hours, with spinach gnocchi.

I tell Diana it is the most tender lamb I can remember ordering: "Look at it fall off the fork." She glares. It is spiced, but so discreetly you must savour it to notice. This is sex on legs, or at least on the shoulder. It comes with a spicy mini-lamb burger and lavender yogurt. It is only let down by shockingly drab couscous.

My other main course, which I let Diana sample, is also delectable: tail of lobster on a bed of lentils and Granny Smith confit served with lobster claw and a sandwich of apple and

lobster knuckle along with apple caviar: a carnival of deliciousness.

Ditto pudding. Palate cleansers can be tiresome but this has ambitions to be its own pudding: melon and ginger granita on a thick bed of caramelised black olives topped with lime leaf foam.

This is swiftly surpassed by chocolate tart with yogurt and ginger, joined by a yummy pair of spicy croquettes whose crispy outsides house gooey warm melting chocolate. Diana's coconut tart lacks sufficient coconut but its passion fruit and banana sorbet could seduce the most frigid taste bud.

Wine? The dry white fumé from Vitika's vineyard is OK, but Chapel Down and other leading producers need not worry yet.

Vatika still has work to do and Kochhar spreads himself thin: will he spend sufficient time here? But it does much brilliantly and is full for a wet Wednesday in the Hampshire wilds. India has come and it has conquered. It might be late, but Mr Kochhar has revenged Dr Aziz. Keith Talent can stick that in his vindaloo.

- **Vatika**, Wickham Vineyard, Botley Road, Shedfield, Southampton (01329 830 405; [www.vatikarestaurant.com](http://www.vatikarestaurant.com)). Dinner for two: £130.50

- **Jasper's verdict:** 8/10