

1



Top Indian restaurants

Spice up your life with **Square Meal's** gourmet guide to the hottest curry houses nationwide

EE AZIZ
228-230 Cowley Rd, Oxford
(01865 794945), open Mon-Sun noon-2pm, 6-11.30pm
Aziz is considered Oxford's best Indian restaurant (though it's actually Bangladeshi). Lush decorations create a potent Eastern aura, setting the mood for its deliciously spicy offerings. Alongside the popular chana, kormas and bhunat, look out for mach bora (fishcakes), kudu gocht (lamb with pumpkin), or try the excellent vegetarian selection and a fab sag porin.

EE DILL RESTAURANT
60 Stamford New Road, Atrincham, Cheshire
(01625 927 9219), open Mon-Sun noon-11pm (Sun-10.30pm)
Dill is famous for being the first Ayurvedic restaurant outside London. Enticing dishes include mussels here masala (flavoured with curry leaves and lemongrass) and methi machhi tikka (salmon flavoured with fenugreek, cloves and a yogurt chesse marinade before being char-grilled). Vegetarians get a beyond-the-usual choice, with dishes such as a tremendous aubergine cooked in a chili, peanut butter and yogurt sauce. Bread deserves a special mention for being fluffy, buttery and first-rate.

THE BIG LEAF Itihaas

EE 19 Fleet Street, Birmingham
(0121-212 3382), open Mon-Fri noon-3pm, 6-11pm; Sat 6-11pm; Sun 6-10.30pm
Comfort levels are high at this smart, spacious Indian restaurant – one of a new breed of sleek, modern restaurants offering an upmarket alternative to the "Balti Mile".
If you visit on a weekday at lunchtime you may assume it has little atmosphere, but in the evening it's a different scene. A meal might start

with baby chicken pan-fried and flavoured with ginger, garlic, green chillies and coriander, continuing with maha jingah – freshwater king prawns marinated and roasted in the tandoor, or perhaps a casserole of lamb (hara bari gocht) roasted with cumin seeds, chili flakes, crushed garlic and spinach and cooked until the sauce is dry and the lamb tender.

Otherwise, for the less adventurous there's the familiar chicken tikka, or order a thali – small portions of several different dishes served with naan and salad.

Voted newcomer of the year at this year's British Curry Awards.

EE THE EASTERN EYE
8a Quiet Street, Bcm
(01225 422323), open Mon-Sun noon-2.30pm, 6-11.30pm
This cavernous Georgian hall makes an extraordinary setting for a restaurant specialising in the cuisine of northern India and Bengal. The quality of food is significantly above the norm. As well as the familiar chicken tikka, tandooris, kormas and darsaks, there's an interesting range of specials,

including seafood and vegetarian dainties. Service is swift and friendly.

EE BMLJ
157-159 Wardour Street, London W1 (020-7267 4243), open Mon-Sun 11am-11pm
BMLJ takes a Wagamama-style approach to Indian food: cheap, cheerful and modern, but without the shared tables. The menu is divided into three sections – "light and refreshing", "new traditions"

and "signature dishes" – the idea being to order three dishes per person to share taste-style. Try peedi chaat (wheat puffs topped with yogurt, chutney, potato, green lentils and vermicelli), a smoky tandoori chut and a lightly spiced fishcake from a mixed seafood plate. And don't miss the fresh fruit juices: the pear and lychee is well worth trying.

EE RAJA'S
286 Roundhay Road, Leeds
(0113 248 0411), open Mon-Fri 11am-2pm, 5-10.30pm; Sat-Sun 3.30-10.30pm
The city end of Roundhay Road is Leeds' "curry mile" and the café where B.P. Singh has been dispensing top-quality Punjabi dishes for more than 20 years remains one of the best. All the faithful are here – korma, rogan josh, dopsala, mstata, bhajni and tandoori dishes. Explore the changing house specials, such as a luscious malhan chicken baked in the clay tandoor and finished with cream. There is plenty for vegetarians, too.

EE ROTI
70 Rose Street, North Lane, Edinbrough (0131-225 1233), open Tues-Fri noon-2pm; Tues-Sat 6-11pm
"Roti is not an Indian restaurant but it does offer Indian food", goes the credo. So no generic vindaloo or chicken korma, but Goan fish curry, Kashmir lamb shank, or fenugreek John Dory instead – and it works brilliantly. Other great dishes include char-grilled king prawns with rocket salad to start; then seared halibut in a coconut and vegetable stew with beetroot wafers.

EE SPICE MERCHANT
25 Thameside, Henley-on-Thames, Berks
(01491 636128), open Mon-Sun noon-2pm, 6pm-midnight
Spice Merchant offers an appealing riverside location, a slick interior and high quality, sophisticated cooking. Imaginatively flavoured home-made chutneys, for example, include a stunning dry lentil and peanut that explodes with flavour. Recommendations include Bigrani chicken korma (jolloed chicken fillets in a sauce of oil, spinach and coconut), succulent jumbo tiger prawns with lime and chili and the Hyderabad bhajni served in a pot sealed with a deliciously flaky bread.

EE VEERASWAMY
99-202 Regent Street, (entrance on Swallow Street), London W1 (0870 7908137), open Mon-Fri noon-2.30pm; Sat-Sun 12.30-3pm; Mon-Sat 5.30-11pm (Fri-Sat -11.30pm); Sun 6-10.30pm
Veeraswamy has just reopened after a £1.5 million overhaul. The interiors are stunning: beautiful coloured lights, eye-catching paintings, gorgeous wooden tables and a collection of royal turbans. The food has a tough job to take centre stage, but it achieves this with bells on. From the moment the first dish arrives, you know you're in for a top-notch experience. Delicious dishes include herb-leaves coated in butter and deep-fried; cyfers flash-grilled and served with a feisty salsa, and meltingly tender lamb cooked Lucknow-style.

EE VUJON
20 Queen Street, Newcastle upon Tyne (0191 221 0601), open Mon-Sat noon-2.30pm; Mon-Sun 6-11.30pm
The Sanskrit word "vujan" translates as "gourmet dinner" and that's what you get at this sophisticated restaurant. A wide-ranging menu offers unusual treats from all over India, while professional service and stylish decor add flair and luxury. Venison comes in a traditional Goan guise, a rack of lamb is beef-would over charcoal, and pheasant is cooked in a mild, spicy sauce in a dish that comes from the French-influenced Pondichery region. Finish with palyas (rice with milk, coconut, raisins and almonds).

PRICE GUIDE

£££ Above £45

££ £30-£45

£ Under £30

Price ranges are indicative of one two-course à la carte meal, plus half a bottle of house wine, coffee, cover charge, service and VAT. Restaurant reviews compiled specially for The Times by Square Meal, for 16 years the London and UK eating-out experts. Opinions are based on the experiences of the Square Meal team of inspectors and of thousands of readers, who are surveyed throughout the year. You can find more reviews and news on their website.

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