

A GASTRONOMIC JOURNEY: FROM KABUL TO KOLKATA

BUILT AT THE DAWN OF THE 16TH CENTURY, THE GRAND TRUNK ROAD IS ONE OF ASIA'S OLDEST AND LONGEST MAJOR ROADS, LINKING THE INDIAN SUBCONTINENT WITH CENTRAL ASIA. GISELLE WHITEAKER SAMPLES THE FLAVOURS THAT LINE THIS PATH AT GRAND TRUNK ROAD IN WOODFORD.

Grand Trunk Road restaurant's Head Chef, Dayashankar Sharma, knows a thing or two about traversing the Grand Trunk Road. Inspired by the ancient 2,500-mile trading route between Afghanistan and Bangladesh, the chef, with restaurateur Rajesh Suri, formerly of Michelin-starred Mayfair restaurant Tamarind, spent three months on the road. Travelling from Lahore in the North to Kolkata in the Bay of Bengal the pair picked up recipes along the way to formulate the menu; a menu that takes people on a mouth-watering culinary journey.

The road traverses four countries and a vast array of dishes – too many for a single restaurant – so the focus is on India. But this is not Indian food as you know it. The dishes plated up in this classy establishment are barely on nodding terms with the kormas and vindaloos that grace the standard Indian menu. Rather, each dish is a stand-alone testament to fine Indian dining, all served with a smile.

The ever-evolving menu ranges from Banarasi Grilled Stuffed Paneer to Lucknow Ki Nihari – slow-cooked lamb shanks in an aromatic sauce. Vegetarian options are generously dotted throughout and there's a host of unusual spices doing their part to elevate the offering, like timur, Marathi mogo and panch poran, a five-spice blend. Choosing what to sample is perhaps the only hardship in dining here, but for the indecisive or inquisitive, Grand Trunk Road has recently introduced a tasting menu that's designed to impress.

After an amuse bouche to alert the palate of the treats to come, the tasting menu kicks off with a plump seared scallop, fixed in place with a generous dollop of a subtle roasted pepper, tomato and garlic chutney that does well to complement, rather than overwhelm, the sweet shellfish. At the opposing end of the rectangular, black plate is a tandoor-grilled baby squid, stuffed with mixed seafood, with a green and sweet mango salsa. The flavours of the ocean with the well-balanced mango bring to mind a tropical island and I can almost feel the sand between my toes.



Scallop and baby squid.



The classy interior of Grand Trunk Road.

INFO

The Tasting Menu at Grand Trunk Road is priced at £68 with wine and £48 without. It is available on Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays. See www.gtrrestaurant.co.uk

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Cocktails at Grand Trunk Road.



A juicy scallop.

The second course is also double-barrelled, but it moves from the ocean to the land. A tubal ground chicken kebab coated with herbs precedes perhaps the highlight of the meal – tikka-marinated rabbit with timur, kebab chini and long peppers. The boneless meat is beautifully tender and the spices are rich, ground on site to maintain the fresh, authentic flavours.

A delicate palate-cleanser follows: lychee and ginger sorbet. While ginger often overpowers more delicate flavours, the sweet lychee element remains dominant, preparing the palate for the fourth course – spiced roast lamb loin, leaning on a cube of masala mash with mustard and cumin, paddling in Rogan josh sauce. This is accompanied by asparagus, cauliflower, broccoli and mangetout with roasted garlic, cumin, black pepper and lime juice, creamy black lentils cooked overnight with ginger and tomato, and masala and coriander naan bread.

The finale is a trio of desserts that will satisfy any sweet tooth. The first small pot contains a creamy yoghurt with Madagascan vanilla, topped with fresh berries; the glass jar in the centre contains a small scoop of tangy lime and thyme sorbet; and the third small bowl holds a pool of chocolate truffle sauce, with a chilli Mandarin cake. It melts in the mouth like a refined version of a Terry's Chocolate Orange.

Not only does Grand Trunk Road redefine Indian dining, it also eliminates the myth that all Indian food is hot and spicy – the latter is certainly the case, as it is the complex combination of spices that elevates each dish, but none leave me begging for mercy with my eyes watering. Instead, I depart Woodford with the inner warmth that comes from a superb meal and the desire to explore the arterial road that connects these dishes. ■



The tasty amuse bouche.



Chicken kebab and tikka-marinated rabbit.



Dessert at Grand Trunk Road.

FOR OTHER AUTHENTIC INDIAN CUISINE, TRY THESE TWO FAVOURITES.

Aldeburgh, Suffolk

Sea Spice at Aldeburgh on Suffolk's Heritage Coast offers contemporary Indian cuisine making use of fresh local produce from land and sea, along with a selection of local craft beers and wine. The signature dish is a sumptuous Goan Fish Curry, sure to delight the palate. www.seaspice.co.uk



Nottingham

MemSaab has two AA rosettes and according to the late AA Gill "is among the top three Indian restaurants in the country". Think delicately spiced barbecued meats, the flavours and cooking methods uprooted from the streets of Lahore, modern Indian cooking refined in London kitchens, and traditional curries, still the staple of Indian and Pakistani households. www.mem-saab.co.uk



GRAND TRUNK ROAD'S HYDERABADI ROYAL LAMB SHANK



SERVES 4

METHOD

Wash the lamb shanks. Heat the oil in a large saucepan for half a minute. Add the fennel seeds, then the peeled, sliced onion and sauté over medium heat, stirring occasionally.

Add the lamb shanks and cook over a high heat for five minutes, stirring constantly. Add the ginger and garlic paste and stir well for a couple of minutes, before adding the turmeric, mace, masala, chilli, cumin, coriander and salt.

Sauté for another five minutes, then add the yoghurt and sauté for a further five minutes over high heat.

Add the lamb stock, stir and allow to simmer for five minutes until the oil separates from the masala. Add enough water to cover the shanks and bring to the boil, then cover with a lid and let it simmer until the lamb is cooked (approximately one hour).

Remove the pot from the heat and remove the cooked shank from the sauce using a pair of tongs. Strain the cooked liquid before cooking the liquid for 10 minutes, or until it has reduced to the desired consistency. Grind the remaining sauce in a blender, to make a smooth paste.

To finish, add the cooked shank back into the sauce, cover and simmer for 15 minutes, and add the rose water and Kewra water.

INGREDIENTS

- 4 lamb shanks
- 4 tbsp vegetable oil
- 2 tbsp fennel seeds
- 2 pcs mace (ground)
- 2 litres lamb stock
- 4 sliced medium onions
- 3 tbsp ginger and garlic paste
- 1 tbsp turmeric powder
- 1 tbsp cumin powder
- 1 tbsp coriander powder
- 4 tbsp natural yoghurt
- ½ tbsp kashmiri chilli powder
- 2 tbsp masala powder
- ½ tbsp rose water
- ½ tbsp Kewra water
- Salt – to taste



Recommended serving is with steamed rice or naan bread.