

**S**OME like it hot – and you're one of them. Because you do, don't you, relish Indian food? Yes, I thought so.

Most of the country seems to. Chicken tikka masala is officially the nation's favourite dish, a truth I find impossible to contemplate.

Were I given the choice of any cuisine the world has to offer, India would rank fairly low on the list. But I had heard good things about Eriki in Swiss Cottage and brought along someone who knows far more than I about all things poppadom.

A travel writer for a national newspaper, who lived in India for a year, he wisely does not wish it to be known that he dined in public with me. Having spent a lifetime in Fleet Street honing a fine reputation for taste and discernment, he is understandably averse to seeing it vanish in a puff of smoke. I won't call him Trev – I'll call him Trav.

The more mature among you might remember the site in Northways Parade, on the Finchley Road, as that of the Cosmo restaurant of old.

It was less of a restaurant and more of a Mittel European club. It was all about coffee, cigarettes and conversation rather than anything to do with food.

We were seated at a big table by the window, affording a peerless view of this particular stretch of Filthy Road, as we call it in my house, an endless, grimy and thunderous motorway rich in petrol vapour.

So I sat there, drinking in the facades of McDonalds, Superdrug and Argos (the first two by Palladio, the last a late work by Sir Christopher Wren), remembering a time when it was all rather more pleasant – before they broadened it and abolished the trees and built up that ludicrous ramp outside what is now the cadaver of Woolworth's.

Camden has thought it a fine idea and a sound investment of

# Mild at heart

Unlike the rest of the nation, novelist **Joseph Connolly** doesn't rank curry as his favourite dish. But, at Eriki in Swiss Cottage, he finds that as long as you leave out the heat it can be rather fine

**Joseph Connolly, right, at Eriki.**



taxpayers' money to festoon all the lamp posts with jaunty banners exhorting passers-by to Love Your Local High Street.

Yeh, right.

By 8.15pm on a weekday evening, Eriki was filled with appreciative regulars.

The decor is hardly typical. They've got all the traditional Indian tables and bum-numbing chairs that look like they've been cobbled together from old doors, railway sleepers and wrought iron railings.

But the ceiling is sleek with a million tiny downlights, the walls the colour of dried blood – with some bits around the bar area, backlit in wet blood.

The music is high-pitched and croony Indian although not quite as insane as the sort favoured by Apu in his Springfield Kwiki-Mart.

The very long menu seems to cover all the styles and regions of Indian cookery – although no

chicken tikka masala, interestingly.

Trav ordered the traditional fire extinguisher, a pint of draught Cobra, and I had a less than traditional Cotes du Rhone – and, no, of course it didn't go with the food. The first time I was urged to have a Cobra in an Indian restaurant, I thought: 'Oh Christ, curried snake, that's all bloody need.'

There are loads of things you actually want to eat here and all of them are described as either 'succulent', 'plump', 'tender' or 'in chunks' and I had to concentrate hard on casting out of my mind all thoughts of Pedigree Chum Mince Morsels.

Trav thought that masala dosa to kick off with would be a good test of the kitchen.

This is a Madras dish – a crepe made from white lentils and rice and filled with spicy potato, rather like a tortilla.

It came with a coconut chutney

which was vile. But he said that it was very good, so I'm obviously wrong about that.

I had khas lamb, which was great – minced lamb and mint leaves formed into two long truncheons, the consistency of burger, the shape of sausage.

These had been grilled in the tandoor and came with a fine and creamy mint sauce, into which to dip the naan bread, ordered by Trav "because it's the done thing".

While waiting for the mains, I swiped a swig of his Cobra just to see if it was as disgusting as all lagers strike me. I swilled it around the mouth and savoured it and, heavens, what a revelation! It was as disgusting as all lagers strike me.

Big hot plates were set before us, and then the deluge of food – all in the strangest elliptical bowls that make you feel quite drunk just to look at them.

The cutlery is heavy, hammered, deadweight and has

little curly ends. Eriki is so very proud of it, they offer sets for sale (a sure sign it gets nicked).

Trav was delighted with his murgh xacuti – a hot chicken curry with roast spices.

It was not quite as good as when he ate it in its home of Goa. But then he had been on a train for 14 unbroken hours so his enjoyment may have been coloured by utter starvation.

Mine was a milder thing altogether because I am a milksop – pistachio murgh korma, very tender chunks of chicken (plump and succulent!) in a lightly spiced pale and creamy pistachio sauce. Actually, the slivers of nut seemed more like almond than pistachio to me, but let it lie.

We shared zafrani pilau – saffron-flavoured Himalayan basmati rice – and very good sauteed medium-spiced spinach and mushroom. Khumb palak, it is called – intensely flavoured, if rather more than medium-spiced.

There was also a lentil dhal the colour of Colman's, which was OK, if you're into lentil dhal.

Trav and I were enjoying ourselves immensely. This is a very polished place but it does cost quite a lot. That spinach thing alone was £7.50. We should have got out while we were winning but I thought it a good wheeze to share a pudding. I know. A pudding in an Indian restaurant.

Rejecting gulab jamun as just too weird (deep-fried milk nuggets: what in the world is a nugget of milk?), I ordered home made Indian ice cream.

Yes, well. Marine Ices and Haagen-Dazs can both sleep soundly in their beds.

What we had here was rather like the top of a bottle of gold cap left too long in the sun. A combination of yogurt and sour sorbet, it was... what is the word? Revolting. Yes, that just about covers it. Alongside was a squirt of Palmolive shaving cream (could have been Gillette) and, out on the street, my mouth was still annoyingly all a-tingle.

And I am now going to be shocking and irreverent. Paul McCartney once said of George Harrison's music – when the latter was deep into his Maharishi and sitar phase – that, if you forgot all the Indian stuff, the melodies were really fine.

I feel the same about the other Indian stuff: heat. Forget the more searing spices and what you're left with is much improved. So shoot me.

Anyway, it was time to slope up to Hampstead village for a soothing glass of champagne. Some like it cold – and I'm one of them.

□ *Joseph Connolly's latest novel is Jack The Lad and Bloody Mary, published by Faber and Faber at £8.99. www.josephconnolly.co.uk.*

## FACTFILE

- **ERIKI**, 4-6 Northways Parade, Finchley Road, Swiss Cottage, 020-7722 0606
- Open everyday noon-3pm, 6pm-11pm. Last orders 10.30pm
- Food ★★★★★☆☆
- Service ★★★★★☆☆
- Cost Realistically, about £80 for dinner for two, with a gallon of Cobra

## A real grounding in Sri Lankan

**T**HERE is something calming about walking into Elephant Walk restaurant in West Hampstead – an un rushed efficiency that allows conversation with regular interruptions by the food.

The Sri Lankan cookery is similar to that of India, but with subtle differences in the use of spices as well as the way some dishes are served.

There is no bitter heat, just a pleasant reminder on the palate of a variety of piquant flavours where, if there is a chilli hotness, it lingers on the tongue for a few seconds, allowing other tastes to take their turn.

With so much on offer, we decided on the thali (£13.95), a banquet or meze-style meal with bits and pieces of a number of dishes.

The menu is extensive so, if you are unsure about what goes with what, the waiting staff always have the time to explain.

Among the dishes were devilled lamb and squid and kingfish in tamarind.

Vegetarians are well catered for, with dishes such as the pumpkin curry (£3.50), cooked with coconut and ground mustard and garlic, and a dry aubergine curry (£3.50), another hit of flavour that has a tamarind base.

Here they also serve the eghopper (£3.25), a bowl-shaped crepe with coconut sambol of grated coconut, chilli and lime, which I have never encountered before.

It has a unique flavour that made the experiment more than worthwhile.

Of course, the Elephant Walk also offers wonderful afternoon teas. I am just not sure you could fit in both in the one day – you end up ordering far too much and you still want more.



## FACTFILE

- **ELEPHANT WALK**  
98 West End Lane  
West Hampstead  
020-7328 3308  
www.elephantwalk.co.uk
- Open: Mondays to Fridays, 5pm to 11pm, Saturdays and Sundays, 12.30pm to 11pm.
- A home delivery service is available

The menu is extensive... Elephant Walk in West End Lane, West Hampstead.

Picture by Jonathan Goldberg

## URBAN SOLUTIONS

SMARTER PROPERTY MAINTENANCE

## HOME TIP OF THE WEEK

□ When putting up a picture, make sure you know where any electrical cables are located in the walls. If there is an electrical socket below the area you want to drill, then the chances are that there is a cable in that area. There is a tool available to check this. But if in doubt then call in a professional to check first.

www.urbansolutions.co.uk 020-7435 1111

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