

Chef launches pop-up venture

Popular Solihull chef Trish Plunkett, who used to run Liaison in Hall Green, is launching a new fine dining venture – with a pop-up restaurant.

Trish and business partner Ank van der Tuin are launching the new eatery at Bracey's Garden Centre, Bickenhill, on February 11 and 12 for Valentine's weekend.

The ambitious £26.50 menu features dishes such as pheasant, foie gras and black pudding terrine, and sea bass served on lobster and lemongrass ravioli.

Trish hopes the first "pop-up," or temporary restaurant, will become a regular feature at Bracey's and is already planning events for March 4 and 5. She hopes to run the weekend pop-ups twice a month and has received a strong response from regulars of Liaison.

Students cook up big success

A team of bakery and chef students from University College Birmingham is celebrating after winning a host of medals and awards at a prestigious hospitality trade show.

The students took part in a variety of competitions at Hospitality 2011 at the NEC. Twenty-five bakery students impressed judges with their skills and creativity and walked away with multiple gold, silver, bronze and merit awards in the decorated celebration cakes, novelty cakes, pastillage and floral sugarcraft categories.

Five chef students took part in live theatre competitions and cold display work, winning bronzes and food hygiene awards.

Ale showcase at drink festival

More than 35 ales will be showcased at the Lichfield Winter Beer & Wine Festival at Lichfield Guildhall on Friday and Saturday (Feb 4-5).

The festival is open from noon-11pm each day; entry is £1.50 until 5.30pm and then £2.50. Local breweries from Staffordshire, Derbyshire and Nottingham will be unveiling some special brews and there will be traditional ciders and more than 20 wines from around the world including Argentina, Australia, Chile, South Africa and France.

Get to the root of the season

Time is running out to try celeriac at its seasonal best. Derived from wild celery, it has a small, edible root and has been used in Europe since ancient times, being mentioned in Homer's *Odyssey* as selinon.

The flesh – crispy when raw, silky smooth when cooked – has a delicate taste which suggests the flavours of celery and parsley with a slight nuttiness. For more information about what's best to eat just now, go to www.eattheseasons.co.uk

DINING OUT

WITH RICHARD McCOMB



ASHA'S

12-22 Newhall Street, Birmingham, B3 3LX. Tel: 0121 200 2767

VERDICT: 7/10

Doing great food a good service

The issue of service in restaurants has become a popular dinner-table talking point thanks to Michel Roux's BBC2 show.

The revered boss of Le Gavroche is attempting to knock seven young people into shape so they can work front of house without upsetting customers. There were initially eight recruits but one gobby individual got the boot, probably saving him from physical harm inflicted by paying guests.

Service, or rather bad service, can kill a meal; it leaves a bad taste in the mouth, like fetid meat. Serving food isn't that difficult, which is why we get steamed up when the delivery of plates of food and drinks goes wrong.

I actually masquerade as a waiter almost every day of the week, in my own home, and I bet you do, too. Typically, I shout at the children – "For the third bloody time, PLEASE come here! Why can't you HEAR me? We only live in a TERRACE house!" – and ask them to clear their books, CDs, hair bobbles, gloves, belts, socks and bags from the table. And would you please lay up the table so it looks like a dining space, not a lost property collection point?

I then do my waiter bit. This involves picking up a plate, or two, from the kitchen, walking a few paces into the dining room/back parlour and depositing them on the newly-revealed table. At this point, I usually say to the children: "It would be nice, for once, if we all started eating at the same time."

I sneer and depart to collect two more plates. See? It's easy, or rather the function of delivering food to a table is easy. Less easy is the mood-setting schmoozing stuff, which I don't need to bother with at home because I'm so hideously popular. It is this aspect of service, the performance and artifice, which is the real killer because if it is done properly it doesn't seem like performance or artifice at all. In fact, you don't know it's happened. It's a glorious illusion, Paul McKenna-ish. Click! (fingers snap): "And you're back in the room ... and here's your bill for our £120-a-head tasting menu. Thank you so much, sir. Always a pleasure to see you, Mr McComb."

So service is easy, in a difficult way. Oddly, it wasn't the deportment, efficiency or politeness of the staff that used to be the problem at Asha's in Birmingham: it was the food. It just wasn't very good, bordering on poor, and in the case of some dishes (I remember in particular a strong-flavoured, "high" tasting lamb curry) nudging into plain unpleasant territory.

What a difference a refocused management team and an invigorated, crack chef can make. The place has been transformed from a style-over-substance image-obsessed joint to place that delivers great food with, yes, impeccable service.

There is always fierce competition for the mantle of best Indian food in Birmingham. Curry, of course,



Asha's has transformed a style-over-substance image into one that stands for quality food

There is always fierce competition for the mantle of best Indian food in Birmingham

is a phenomenally popular cuisine across the country, perhaps nowhere more so than in Birmingham where I contend we have the best range of outlets and the highest standards, quite possibly, of any comparable European city. There might be swankier Michelin-star Indian restaurants in London but the capital comes a poor second when it comes to range, particularly when mapped against population size.

Set against an intoxicating backdrop of bhunas,

kebabs, dals and paranthas, who is the best? I can think of five Indian restaurants, off the top of my head, where I would be happy to take people, depending on the occasion, and I can't think of that for any other cuisine in the city.

Asha's is bang in the mix. I haven't had a finer curry in Birmingham. This place is now very much at the top level.

You won't meet a nicer, more committed head chef than Guneet Singh Bindra. Every so often he will appear in the capacious, exotically lit dining room to talk effortlessly with guests. Guneet takes great interest in what goes on out front as well as in the kitchen and he actually (ready for this?) values customer feedback, good or bad, and if necessary does something about it.

Really though Guneet hardly needs to worry about the dining room, where the smart, helpful staff are superbly marshalled by general manager Jaimon George, who's a fireball of enthusiasm. Jaimon's ethos for delivering attentive, efficient service permeates the team. Our waiter for the night, Sachin, is one of many star players. You can always tell the quality of a waiter by the way he or she reacts with children. Sachin made our girls feel relaxed and special, without treating them like lobotomised idi-



Chef Guneet Singh Bindra has stamped his identity over Asha's excellent food but values customer feedback

ots à la Harvester, circa 1992 ("Everything all right with you kiddies? Smashing! Would you like some red sauce with that?" Mad gurn and smiley thumbs-up gesture ...)

Perked up entirely by a Delhi Devil, a good house cocktails featuring Tanqueray gin enlivened with pomegranate, mint, lemon and ginger beer, we split a dish of barrah kebab and a vegetable kebab platter. The former comprised lovely little lamb chops marinated in ginger, spices, garlic and yoghurt. The veggie platter, delicate and pretty, featured paneer ka soola (tandoori shashlik of cottage cheese, tomatoes, capsicum, onions and pineapple with a tangy mustard flavour); also tikki with channa (a fried potato "cutlet" stuffed with mashed green peas, served with tangy chickpeas); and spinach and lentil tikki. All very good but the bowl of papdi chat was super good. I've never had it before but can reliably inform you that it's a mix of deep-fried flour pastries, Indian vermicelli, mashed potato, sweet yogurt, mint and tamarind sauce. Totally odd, totally addictive.

It's the care and expertise lavished on the ingredients that makes all the difference. The thigh meat

and breasts in the chicken Chettinad are cooked in a sauce of black peppercorns, fennel seeds, white sesame seeds, grated fresh coconut, coriander seeds, green cardamom, cinnamon and cumin seeds, each spice roasted separately and ground at a low speed to maximise aromatic kick. The spices are then blended with tomatoes, onions and coconut milk, with curry leaves and red chillies.

The classic butter chicken (murgh makhani), a favourite with children, was in another league to the disappointing dish we had here in 2007, several months after Asha's opened in Newhall Street. This one had a smooth, flavoursome sauce with subtle, rather than harsh, herbs and spices (coriander, fenugreek, green chilli) finished with unsalted butter, cream, khoya (dried milk) and garam masala.

However, my pick of the dishes was the gorgeous prawn ginger bhuna. There's no rubbery, vulgar seafood here – just whopping, sweet, juicy black tiger prawns which bask in a delicious gravy of blended caramelised onions, fresh ginger paste, green chilli seeds, cashew nuts and yoghurt.

Asha's has restaurants in some very wealthy des-

tinations – Dubai, Qatar, Bahrain – but the UK franchise is owned by Brandasia. As well as developing his formidable skills, Guneet has driven the re-birth of the Birmingham restaurant's cooking by differentiating it from the Indian cuisine favoured by Middle Eastern palates. Having worked in Dubai, the Punjabi-born chef has discovered UK diners prefer more spice, chilli and garlic in their food. Dishes have been adjusted accordingly and the results are superb.

We had a bottle of good value South Africa sauvignon blanc for £15.95 but you can whoop it up with Cloudy Bay or Sancerre.

Our bill for four (which effectively included a take-out portion of lamb biryani, as we over-ordered) was about £140, or £35 a head with drinks. For cooking like this, that's entirely right.

I can't claim any credit for the turn-around at Asha's but I am genuinely thrilled to see the results, which represent an object lesson for budding restaurateurs.

[7/10 means "very good cooking and ambition; good attention to detail throughout".]

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