

# The Cook's Christmas

Forget the 'nappy valley' title, our neck of the woods is fast becoming a destination for foodies. As the Christmas party season starts to take off, Louise Bates finds out what treats local chefs are planning for us...



## feature

It was, as it happened, a quest fulfilled when I at last discovered Tooting's famous Kastoori Restaurant which caters for more Christmas office parties than most. Despite having heard great reports about it over the years, I had never actually been there - until I was asked to sample Kastoori's Christmas delicacies and meet their creator, Manoj Thanki.

The Thanki family has stamped its presence on the surrounding Tooting community for the last 17 years. Manoj describes his kitchen as an authentic British Punjabi hybrid that can be found in any Gujarati home. But along the way family members from Uganda have brought an East African influence to the cooking which gives the food its unique identity.

Many customers at Christmas are regulars and know exactly why they have come to Kastoori. They do not want to waste precious 'celebrating'

time pouring over a menu and ordering. So staff take away the strain for larger parties and provide a selection of the restaurant's most popular dishes, including potato curry, chilli banana curry and dahi puri - a light, spicy little pancake that explodes in your mouth. It would be more than Manoj's life is worth to change some stalwart dishes. But what always changes, according to season, is the ingredients. No two vegetable curries are ever quite the same.

Nowadays ethnic cooking is a large part of the once traditional British kitchen. The time and trouble taken in tracking down and preparing fresh, and possibly exotic, ingredients is as much a compliment to your guests as once upon a time it was selecting a choice cut of beef for a good roast. So, in the days before and after Christmas, why not prepare a curry? According to Thanki family philosophy, the key to cooking a good curry is keeping the ingredients simple. Speaking more like Karl Lagerfeld than a chef, Manoj says cooking is like dressing a woman - less is best!

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A 'little black number' would not be out of place at SW18's Michelin star-rated Chez Bruce, where all hell breaks loose at Christmas, according to its joint owner and chief chef, Bruce Poole. The restaurant is reputedly one of the five best in London – which is quite a coup for buzzy Wandsworth Common.

Bruce's own Christmas lunch – which he cooks – is the traditional turkey and all the trimmings, which this year he will enjoy with his family in Wiltshire. He solves the 15-veg-on-4-burners problem by pre-roasting his root vegetables in the morning. Mixing them with Jerusalem artichokes, shallots, chestnuts and sprouts, he tips the lot into a gigantic pot-roasting dish for a 15-20 minute spurt of heat before serving.

All this after four weeks of catering for hundreds

Anyone would have a hard time dancing on the narrow bar counters at Will Oakley's new Ditto Deli on the Alfarthing Road in SW18. However, the deli's main business is selling fine foods – wonderful English cheeses, olive oils, condiments, hams and hors d'oeuvres. With a bit of bribery and corruption, Will has succeeded in spreading the word about the deli – helped in no small part by hosting a massive street party when he opened in October. Hundreds of people turned up to quaff champagne and sample the sort of canapés he and his chef are already planning for Christmas drinks parties.

Will hopes very much that local people will treat Ditto Deli like a second home, even so far as using it to stage a private dinner party in the cosy dining room behind the counters. Urban chic meets rustic Brooklyn is how Will describes the

**PERHAPS NOT SURPRISINGLY, TURKEY WILL NOT BE APPEARING CENTRE-STAGE ON THE MENU**



*From left to right, Manoj Thanki, Will Oakley and Bruce Poole*

of diners at the restaurant. Time-management, Bruce says, is paramount. In December the restaurant's capacity literally doubles – with lunch becoming as popular as dinner is during the rest of the year. Maintaining standards and getting large supplies of the highest quality ingredients become Bruce's over-riding concerns.

Perhaps not surprisingly, turkey will not be appearing centre-stage on the menu but seasonal produce, especially game such as pheasant, venison and rabbit, will be. Head sommelier, Jason McAulisse, will be on hand to service the Christmas spirit with wine tips. And while we are on the subject of 'Christmas spirits', how does an up-market eatery handle those who like nothing better at the annual get-together than getting a little worse for wear? Being a laid-back kind of guy, Bruce shrugs his shoulders at this one, reminding me that there is no formal dress code at Chez Bruce. So, can we take it there is no official ban on dancing on the tables?

deli's interior. And, indeed, a flavour of Notting Hill Gate and Islington can now be found on the rat-run to Southfields, right in the heart of residential Wandsworth.

**Kastoori Restaurant**

188 Upper Tooting Road, SW17 Tel: 8767 7027  
 Open for lunch Wed – Sun 12.00 - 2.30pm  
 Open for dinner every night 6.00 - 10.30pm  
 Starters: £1.95 - £4.25  
 Curries: £4.75 - £5.25

**Chez Bruce**

2 Bellevue Road, SW17 Tel: 8672 0114  
 Open for lunch and dinner 7 days a week  
 Christmas Lunch: menu £27.50  
 Christmas Dinner: menu £35.00 (weekdays)

**Ditto Deli**

2 Barmouth Road, SW18 Tel: 8871 2586  
 Open Mon - Fri 7.30am - 7.30pm  
 Sat 8.00am - 7.30pm Sun 9.00am - 3.00pm