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## Lalbagh, Bourn

Written by Louise Martin

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Lalbagh in Bourn scooped yet another national award late last year. LOUISE MARTIN drops by to meet owner and chef Miftaur Choudhry

ANYONE questioning that curry is Britain's best dish should take a trip to Lalbagh in Bourn.

Known for its sophisticated approach to the take-away favourite, the Bangladeshi and Indian restaurant has a list of awards as long as the menu's sundries – which it continues to add to.

Last year the restaurant was named Restaurant of the Year in the East at the takeaway.com English Curry Awards, as well as being shortlisted in the British Curry Awards 2012 in the 'Best in the Midlands' category.

It's high praise indeed for the owners and brothers, Miftaur and Mumitur Choudhury, who opened the restaurant in 2008, but after one taste of the first-class cuisine you'll agree the accolades are very much deserved. "The awards are amazing," beams Miftaur, 42. "I know lots of people in Cambridge who have been in this game for years and they have never achieved so much in so little time. It's like someone patting you on the back and saying 'well done'."

Born in Bangladesh, Miftaur's passion for Indian cuisine stems from his homeland, where fish is a staple ingredient in many dishes. When he was 12, Miftaur and his family moved to England and settled in Hackney, London. He left school at 16 with the one intention of building a career in the kitchen.

"My first role was a waiter and I did that for a couple of years," he remembers. "In the back of my head I always knew I wanted to run my own restaurant and because of that I knew you needed to be able to cook good food, but you also need to know the management side, too."

Miftaur moved to Cambridge in the late 80s and began working as a chef in various Indian restaurants in the city. With no formal training he had to learn on the job, but he also gained a great deal of cooking skills from his brother-in-law who ran his own Indian takeaway and gave Miftaur a job in his kitchen. "I worked alongside his chef who was a tremendous person and taught me the basic skills and then I would make my own creations and that is how I learnt," he explains. "It was a lot of trial and error."

Despite Miftaur's passion and ability in the kitchen, when his two daughters were growing up he found the long, unsociable hours very hard and decided to become a taxi driver in order to give more time to family life. "I did that for six years and the whole time I was thinking about opening my own restaurant."

Miftaur continued to experiment with flavours and ingredients between shifts, building up his repertoire of dishes, until a conversation with Mumitur, in 2008, changed everything. "We were chatting and he said: 'When are you going to open a place'. I told him if he found the right place we would give it a go and the honest truth, the same day, he went on the internet and he saw this place and we both really liked it."

That place was Lalbagh at 49 Alms Hill. A former pub, the building had been closed for around a year but the brothers could see the potential. The building was gutted and a new kitchen, stylish décor and chic furniture completed the restaurant's modern look.

With the recession taking hold the brothers were taking a giant leap of faith and Miftaur admits it hasn't been easy. "The first year and a half was a struggle," he says. "Lots of my friends and colleagues said: 'Miftaur, you're crazy opening a restaurant in the middle of nowhere. You're not going to survive.' But luckily we have, and are thriving."

The successful chef puts Lalbagh's achievements down to three factors: good quality food, excellent service and a welcoming ambience. Miftaur devises the restaurant's menu – which features an impressive selection of speciality dishes including Lalbagh favourites butternut beef and rhubarb sea bass – and although he is not in the kitchen on a daily basis, his chefs are cooking his menu the way he has taught them. "The menu side is all me and it's important it is cooked the way I want it. Every time I get a new chef come in I go back into the kitchen to show them how it should be cooked."

Miftaur is also keen for his customers to try something different to their usual madras or kurma. “I’d love to take all the traditional stuff off the menu but I can’t because the majority of our customers like to go with what they know, but if they become very regular then I tell them: ‘Forget madras, try this’. I say to my customers: ‘If you don’t like it I won’t charge you a penny for it,’ but that’s never happened yet!”

Lalbagh is at 49 Alms Hill, Bourn, CB23 2SH. For more information call (01954) 719131/ 719364 – booking is recommended at weekends.

Read more: <http://www.cambridge-news.co.uk/Food-and-drink/Dining-out-reviews/Lalbagh-Bourn-14022013.htm>