

Café Spice

In the old magistrates' court in Prescott Road, near Tower Bridge, is situated London's prestigious Indian restaurant, Café Spice. Its Asian cuisine – south and north Indian, Goan, Malaysian and Persian – is reflected in the internationalism of its staff. Among the kitchen, front-of-house and waiting staff are Keralans, Goans, Algerians and Iranians, to name but a few.

The menu at Café Spice must be one of the most detailed anywhere. Fifty- to a hundred-word explanations of each traditional dish leave the diner in no doubt as to what they are eating. But it also raises as many questions from curious gourmards about the type of cuisine they are experiencing.

So Syrus Todiwala from Bombay, co-owner with entrepreneur Michael Gottlieb, quickly realised that his staff were being asked for information which they needed to be able to give in good English. The set menu changes every week and the a la carte menu every 6 months, so they needed to be continually up to date.

The answer was to provide them with English lessons, offering both general, colloquial language and specialist catering vocabulary. After making inquiries, he was put in touch with Making Training Work, a small training outfit operating out of London's East End. Here basic skills teacher Olive Home designed a course that suited the restaurant's needs. It lasted 10 weeks for two hours a week, and targeted six staff.

Olive comments: "Four trainees were concurrently doing an NVQ in food preparation and hygiene with a tutor from the School of Asian and Oriental Cookery at Hackney Community College. This meant the restaurant would keep up with regulations to do with the food, and it meant that the trainees could acquire a qualification and a broader understanding which made them feel more in control of their lives."

Most of the staff lived in rooms above the restaurant, worked hard and sent money home. They had little outside contact and this was evident in the way they used English. Olive and the NVQ tutor liaised so that the English lessons could reinforce the catering content. And Olive employed a lot of role play – how to greet a customer, how to say goodbye, the correct body language to adopt, and so on.

Waiter Mohammed Chalangayam, who sends regular money home to his wife in India, takes up the story: “After the course I can understand English better outside,” he said. “Before, I could speak little English but now I know the menu. I am very happy doing the course. We studied polite language, storing food, what to do when you cut yourself.”

The course also covered topics such as studying a simplified version of a “Daily Telegraph” write-up on the restaurant, preparation for a film crew, how to give reasons for absence or leaving early and explaining why certain procedures are followed at work.

Like Mohammed, Abu Thottathil is from Kerala but has his wife and two children with him in London. He came to England via Dubai where he worked as a chef and learnt how to cook Arabian dishes, a skill that landed him a job at Café Spice. “Improving my English has been most useful in the computer system,” he said. “The waiter orders the food from the kitchen by a computer in the dining room and I have to read the message. The classes were good and they tied in with the health and hygiene classes.”

Café Spice has recently launched its sandwich-making division, finding its exotic dishes popular with City workers as snacks at lunchtime. The man in charge of the section is 35-year-old Algerian Abdul Tighiouart. “We supply four shops and to Great Ormond Street hospital,” he said. “The direct contact I have with customers outside means I have to have good English. I can now chat to people, not just talk about the business. The course was very useful but I still continue to study alone with an English cassette.”

Head waiter Felix Gasper Fernandez has been at Café Spice for seven years. His senior position is reflected in the fact that his English is the best among the six who took the course. “I have to be able to talk to customers, maybe for quite a long time, so I always have to improve,” said Felix, who used to be head waiter to the royal family in Kuwait. “There are sometimes problems with drunken City workers who are rude and racist to my staff and I have to be able to deal with that. It’s not easy,” he said.

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