

Ue, ancient Iraq, is the oldest state in the world, the first country, existed before the end of the ice age. The fertile crescent that runs between the Tigris and the Euphrates was where farming was born, the first place where more than 200 people could live together. It was the beginning of civilisation, because they grew food. And one of the first things cultivated were almonds.

Now consider the almond. It's one of the great mysteries of human consumption. The fruit, from the same genus as apricots and cherries, is only edible when unripe. The stone is the nut. And here's the miraculous bit. You know when you get a bitter almond, how deeply unpleasant that is? Well, that's the natural flavour of almonds — they're poisonous with prussic acid. The sweet almond is a mistake, a very occasional genetic cock-up. So, how did they manage to grow them? You might get one sweet almond in a blue moon on a bitter almond tree, but it would take years of selective breeding to get sweet almond trees. And if, by chance, you did come across a sweet one, you couldn't plant it, because you'd already have eaten it. You work it out.

Almonds are a magical ingredient. They've found their way into all European and Asian cooking. They can be both sweet and savoury. They were hugely important to medieval and Renaissance banquets, and are still the sweet devotion at the heart of all our festivals: simnel cake at Easter, the French galette des rois at Epiphany, German stollen, English Christmas and wedding cakes. In Iraq, they celebrate with lowzina, a triangular almond sweetmeat flavoured with rose-water and cardamom, and decorated with gold leaf.

If you think you can taste a hint of a prussic parable here, you're right. We're all connected by the gossamer web of shy pleasures and shared joy. The triumph of civilisation has always been to find the one sweet nut in the bag of bitter ones. And, boy, are we suffering a lot of bitter nuts at the moment.

PS: most of the world's almonds are now grown in America. This week, we went to the Painted Heron, an Indian restaurant on Cheyne Walk. Cheyne Walk is not the natural home of curry, and I was interested to see how they'd adapted to such an inhospitable climate. But I made a mistake. I took the Blonde, Gemma Khan and Elizabeth Hurley. And, being the only man, I was pathetically perky. I think I ate a napkin instead of a naan.

The menu is written in English, which ought to be easier, but I'm so used to reading them in anglicised Hindi that I had to work the translation back again. The restaurant itself is a collection of open-ended rooms, all willfully European with nary a painted tiger or bank houri. It was buzzing with locals — that is, rich people who dress poor and talk as if they're giving interviews.

We started with dosas filled with crab, lamb chops with pickling spice, and minced kebabs. There's an ancient law pertaining to Asian food: the first thing you put in your mouth is invariably the most unbelievably delicious thing you've ever eaten; and the last thing you put in your mouth is this close to making you gag. When the dishes arrive, they have the moistness of Elizabeth Hurley on a plate with Gemma Khan spices and Blonde pickle: when you've had enough, you want the water to take them away faster than RestoKil.

We shared a chicken tikka made with almonds, lamb shank, chicken in cashew sauce, paneer with spinach and mint, all of which was just what the fakir ordered, but hardly exceptional: the lamb not quite melting enough, the chicken with cashews thin. Best of all was the paneer.

Indian puddings are always a problem. Personally, I love gulab jamun, the sticky fried milk-ball in tooth-melting syrup. Gemma rocked with pleasure over cold sweet vermicelli, which, frankly, I think is like eating wet fish bait.

The waiter asked if she'd ever been to India. She smiled enigmatically. Waiters are the Painted Heron's problem. When they're there, they're charming and attentive — they just aren't there very often. What it's like if you don't take Elizabeth Hurley, I can't imagine.

Overall, if you can walk here, it's a nice restaurant. For Cheyne Walk, it's the first sign of civilisation.

WHERE TO EAT INDIAN



The Eastern Eye, So Quiet Street, Bath (01225 422323)

William Hague apparently turned up at the opening night of this Bath establishment a few years back, but don't let that put you off. For one thing, it's set in a Georgian building with an incredible triple-domed ceiling. For another, the food, even if it sounds familiar, far surpasses your average curry-house fare. And for a third, they've pruned plaudits from celebrity customers in the back of the menu. "So wonderful" (Lesley Joseph); "Thank you for a great dinner" (Danny O'Connell); "Fantastic" (Well Harm). Okay, so it's not Shakespeare, but still...

Nirmal's, 189-193 Glossop Road, Sheffield (0114 272 4034)

A Sheffield institution, Nirmal's lies on a backlined strip in the centre of town, a place filled with half-raised women, even when it's 20C. Although, deceptively, it's an unpretentious Indian restaurant, the food raises it above the rank and file. The pilot contains whole spices, the meat dishes have a homelier quality than most, there are delicious curried parsnips, pistachio ice cream with silver leaf and gulab jamun. The formidable Mrs Nirmal will help you choose dishes that complement each other. Health warning: take her advice.

Balbir's@Route 77, Symington, Ayrshire (01563 830340)

This place hugs the main Glasgow to Ayr road so closely, you could stop the traffic by sticking a large nook out of the window. Jam on the brakes, it's worth it. The main gimmick here is that they don't give you a menu. They just bring food, and plenty of it. It starts with a fresh, stogy Bombay mix (light years away from the usual pungent poppadum). Chickpea chut comes with a soft yoghurt bread, chicken is dry-fried with spices; lamb is slow-cooked with a marrow bone. Hold out for dessert and you'll get a blazing Indian knickerbocker glory made from ice cream and homemade gulab jamun.

Monique Mangelhof

e

MARCH 2, 2003