

A world of flavour

Nigel Slater celebrates the foreign foods that put the “great” into modern British cooking

MY FIRST TASTE of unfamiliar food, something out of my culinary comfort zone, was when my brother took me, aged eight, to an Indian restaurant in Wolverhampton.

It was the mid 1960s, he had his hair Brylcreemed and wore the latest pointed winklepicker shoes, and wanted me to experience something a world away from the meat and two veg my mother cooked at home. The restaurant was dark and a little forbidding; the smell intriguing, warm and quite unlike anything I'd ever come across before. The food, hot, generously spiced and faintly mysterious, came as a shock. Until that moment, my everyday eating had

been of food with gentle flavours, boiled vegetables, calming stews – even Dairylea and Ritz Crackers were considered exciting. To have a mouthful of spice-soaked rice, red-brown gravy and meat that prickled my tongue was so extraordinary, I didn't know whether to like it or not.

Cut to a hotel dining room in Goa, India, 15 years later, the first meal of an adolescent beach holiday. While my father and brothers had taken to the new craze of Indian meals from a cardboard box, the famous instant Vesta Curry, I had not eaten anything “foreign” since that night in the Kohinoor with my brother. Here, I had no option but to eat the food in front of me or live on biscuits for the entire holiday.

It sounds like a cliché, that moment on the route to Damascus, but it is true when I say that first mouthful of Indian food on its home territory changed everything. Grilled prawns, laughably hot with turmeric and chilli, straight from the tandoori oven, blew my safe little culinary world apart. Those prawns were to be the start of a love of spicy tastes that took me back to India time and time again.

It seems extraordinary, looking at how I eat now, that I could have been so reluctant and unadventurous as a nine- or ten-year-old, but

I suspect I was typical of the British public at the time. The late 1960s and early 70s heralded a large change in what we eat in Britain. So what happened? How did we end up with supermarkets and restaurants offering food from every country on the planet? How did we become a nation with a ▷

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NIGEL SLATER'S KITCHEN
FOR RADIO TIMES BY
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