

Singh whips up a grand expansion

As the Cinnamon Club restaurant turns 10, **Mark Leftly** meets its founding chef who has growth plans for his curry house

Vivek Singh was determined to get back on the leaderboard. His name had once adorned the blue column of chefs who had most quickly tackled the omelette challenge on BBC1's *Saturday Kitchen*.

But enough rivals had beaten the 20.8 seconds it took the 39-year-old chef to flash fry a three-egg omelette that he had been demoted to the list of also-rans. That Singh was back as a guest on the 200th edition of the show added to the pressure of trying to regain his elite status in the omelette league.

Ahead of the show, Singh honed his skills by breaking and cooking 100 eggs. His staff groaned as they were forced to tuck into yet another runny, undercooked omelette.

Singh was ready. The cameras rolled. The omelette slid on to the plate. The timer stopped. Disappointment. Only 0.4 seconds shaved off his previous best.

Two months on, Singh recalls the failure in the fine cognac-lined room flanking the Cinnamon Club, his 250-seat Indian restaurant in Westminster. The favourite of politicians and television producers celebrates its 10th anniversary next month and will soon welcome its one millionth customer.

The deliciously deconstructed Indian food, which includes roasted plaice with Bengali spiced crab, was a daring addition to the London dining scene in 2001. Many experts believed that the consortium of investment bankers behind the venture was doomed to failure, its £3.5m plans to transform a Grade II-listed former library into a bit of a posh curry house seemed preposterous.

"There wasn't any precedent," says Singh, who is executive chef and chief executive of the business. "It was very ambitious, if slightly arrogant. We

wanted to change everything you knew about Indian food, which sounds a bit pompous, slightly ridiculous."

On the face of it, the Cinnamon Club has defied the naysayers and serves 100,000 customers a year and has a turnover of £5m a year. Gordon Brown and David Cameron were patrons before they ran the country, while Cherie Blair and the shadow Chancellor Ed Balls are also fans.

Decked out in his monogrammed white chef's jacket from the lunchtime shift, Singh has just served Fern Britton dressed in a sequined black evening gown. Later, the dress glistens behind Phillip Schofield and Holly Willoughby as they pick up a prize at the National Television Awards for their work on *This Morning*.

Despite this success, it is only now that Singh is eyeing up major expansion plans. The Cinnamon Club struggled for much of its existence, and was even forced into a company vol-

untary arrangement (CVA) – a form of insolvency procedure to pay off debts – in 2005. The restaurant had struggled with costs in its early years, and though cutbacks on professional fees had resulted in improved profit margins, the business still owed Inland Revenue £1m.

"That sounds like nothing now, but then it felt like something we would never get out of," says Singh, who has

'We wanted to change everything you knew about Indian food'

'Cinnamon Kitchen's 2008 opening was catastrophic in terms of timing'

boosted the profile of the business with his television appearances and cookbooks. "We were grossly undercapitalised but we paid off the Revenue one year ahead of schedule [late

2009]. About 80 to 90 per cent of companies that go into CVA don't come out."

Singh has become much more than just the creator of exceptional culinary twists as profits have increased. From what he describes as "a notional stake" of no more than 5 per cent when the restaurant started, he has been rewarded by investors with what

he reticently describes as a "significant" shareholding. With a cash-rich business and operational control, Singh is embarking on two major growth plans. He wants to open three more Cinnamon Clubs in major international cities within the next five years, with New York and Shanghai among the likely candidates. At that point comes what Singh describes as "the endgame", which would be to bring his unique style of cooking back to his native India, probably Mumbai or Delhi.

The other strand is to roll out the less fussy Cinnamon Kitchen brand across London. Based in the City, the first Kitchen opened at the end of 2008. With just a hint of a rueful smile, Singh admits: "If you think about it, that was catastrophic in terms of timing." Despite launching at the height of the financial crisis, the Kitchen is doing well, with more than £2.5m revenue and impressive earnings before interest, taxation, depreciation and amortisation – a key profit figure – of 12 to 14 per cent.

Singh is currently buying a site for the next Kitchen in the West End and hopes to have "about half a dozen" within the M25 by 2016. "In all, the Kitchens could cost about £7.5m, paid for out of internal funding," says Singh. "At the moment we're not looking for institutional funding."

Singh seems to believe that should the Kitchens become well known on upmarket high streets, the Cinnamon Club will benefit. The grand old library that houses the restaurant is



undoubtedly impressive, but the listing means that the elegant redbrick façade is unspoilt by any signs pointing to the world's first Michelin-starred Indian restaurant.

"The number of people who have asked me about the Club: 'do I need to be a member to eat here?', 'is this London's best kept secret?'" sighs Singh. "On one level that's very flattering, but on another that is very frustrating." He says that the "more accessible" Kitchen, which is "a bit more fun with no ties and waistcoats", will mean that the original should be better recognised.

This is important, as Singh acknowledges that the investors will want to cash in at some point. He rules out a stock exchange listing, saying that "a product as intense as ours" means that the eventual exit will be "someone looking for a trophy restaurant".

Even then, it seems likely that Singh will remain on Britain's screens. Although his family is from central India and he grew up close to Calcutta, Singh speaks as though he is committed to his new home in London's New Cross.

The Cinnamon Club tries to source its ingredients locally, so poultry farmers around the capital must be rubbing their hands with glee at the prospect of him staying. Singh will be smashing a lot more eggs over the years as he tries to master the omelette challenge.



YES, CHEF Vivek Singh has made the Cinnamon Club a success despite early setbacks
JUSTIN SUTCLIFFE