

Pre-theatre dinner *Genuine bargains at this city institution*

The Raj 35 King Street,
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Bristol's Indian restaurant scene of today would be a very different place had it not been for Feroze Ahmed.

Mr Ahmed, who died in 2000, opened his first restaurant, the Taj Mahal in Stokes Croft, in 1958. It was the city's first Indian restaurant and he quickly followed it with several others over the following three decades.

A bout of ill health in the 1980s forced him to sell his businesses apart from one outlet – The Raj in King Street, which his son, Hasan, has run since his death.

The Raj opened in 1981 and it remains one of central Bristol's most enduring Indian restaurants. Tucked away in a basement close to the Old Vic, this subterranean restaurant has a timeless quality about it, with its arching, white brick ceilings, discreet lighting and row of booths separated by colourful stained glass panels.

The menus are traditional, with familiar dishes from the Bangladeshi repertoire, rather than cutting-edge or

contemporary offerings. One recent development has been the "early bird" menu, which is available seven days a week between 5.30pm and 7.30pm (and now all night on Sundays).

Early birds are indeed offered remarkable value, as the £14.95 price includes a starter or side dish, a main course, a choice of sundries (rice, nan bread or roti) and a drink (a glass of house wine, bottle of Cobra or soft drink).

Tables for this menu may have to be vacated by 8.30pm during busy periods, but it still gives pre-theatre diners plenty of time to enjoy a meal if their shows at the Old Vic or Hippodrome start at 7.30pm.

When I arrived at 6pm on a mid-week evening, the restaurant was doing a surprisingly brisk trade for early January. My fellow diners were a mix of post-work suits, a number of people heading to see *Peter Pan* next door and a few students taking advantage of the offer.

From the early bird menu, I started with lamb tikka

(normally £5.25) – five tender pieces of spicy, smoky lamb with a dish of chilled mint yoghurt and the time-honoured Indian restaurant garnish of shredded iceberg, tomato and cucumber.

This was followed by chicken tikka rezella (normal price £9.20), a thick, dark, medium-spice sauce with large chunks of chicken breast and an abundance of green chillies and sliced garlic. I mopped up the sauce with a garlic nan (£2.95) that was too dry and not especially garlicky.

Still, with a bottle of Cobra, the normal price for this meal would have been over £20, making the £14.95 deal especially appealing.

Verdict

More than 30 years after it opened, this enduring Indian restaurant has remained consistent in terms of food and service and the new "early bird" menu is a genuine bargain.