

## Restaurants

# Doctor serves up the perfect tonic in form of fine-tasting Persian food

It takes courage to leave a perfectly respectable, well-paid profession and pursue a dream.

But Dr Lal Haider, chef-patron of Old Hall Restaurant, in Dorrington, has courage in spades. The talented cook left his post at the Royal Shrewsbury Hospital so that he could cook the Persian-influenced food of his childhood.

He opened his own restaurant two years ago and has subsequently won a number of nominations in prestigious competitions.

In his restaurant's short history, he has been a finalist in the Shropshire Council Curry Chef of the Year twice, as well as being nominated for the prestigious South Asia Curry Chef of the Year Award.

Such a track record would suggest that Dr Haider is always the bridesmaid and never the bride, a man destined to play second fiddle to the industry's high-flying chefs. Nothing could be further from the truth.

During his two years at Old Hall Restaurant, Dr Haider has been on an upward curve. His food is elegant and stunning; he specialises in a commodity that is all-too-rare in local restaurants – simplicity.

### Marriage

While other chefs rush to add additional spices, textures and flavours: Dr Haider reigns himself in. He creates dishes that are a perfect marriage of flavour. He doesn't beat his diners about the head with a barrowload of chillies, he uses subtler spices and herbs to seal the deal.

Truthfully, his dishes are not out-gunned by those from restaurants that have claimed first place – and I should know, I've been on those judging panels – he's a hair's breadth away from being on the top of the podium.

The Old Hall Restaurant has proved a welcome addition to Shropshire's dining scene. It has brought with it two unique components:

### Old Hall Restaurant, Dorrington



Food at the Old Hall restaurant is very refined and not over flavoured

**Old Hall Restaurant:** Dorrington, SY5 7JD  
**Telephone:** 01743 719100, [www.oldhallpersian.co.uk](http://www.oldhallpersian.co.uk)  
**Rating:** 8/10

sensational service and previously-unsampled flavours from Persia.

While the county is well represented by Indian, Bangladeshi, Chinese, Thai, Pakistani and other Asian cuisines, it has previously been without the flavours of Persia. Happily, Dr Haider has filled that gap and his menu is a real treat.

He cooks authentic dishes, remembering the flavours of his youth. When my friend and I visited for a midweek service, we opted for a selection from his specials menu; which comprised four courses of deliciousness. We started with a delightful couplet of veggie kotlets, which are a popular street food in parts of Asia.

The kotlets are traditionally made with ground beef, potatoes, onions and spices, though Dr Haider had created the meat with fresh

aubergine and modified the spice mix, almost reinventing the dish.

It proved a delectable vegetarian appetiser, with wonderful flavours coming through from cumin, carum, turmeric and the aubergine. It was served simply, with a salad garnish and chives and my friend and I devoured our servings. The health-conscious fish course was a khush-mazza mahi, or, salmon steak marinated with traditional Indo-Persian spices.

It had been steamed with great skill, so that pink salmon fillet was at the point where translucence turns to opacity. My friend and I were impressed by Dr Haider's skill, in cooking the fish with the precision of a surgeon. The marinade was a treat. Flavours of cinnamon, clove, cumin and aniseed were mixed with Nigella and

carom while there were also flavours of coriander, parsley, garlic, honey and lime juice, as well as salt and pepper.

The flavours were vibrant and intense: the mix of sweet and sour, salty and savoury was artful. The dish was served prettily, with a platter of pomegranate rice. It was faultless.

The main course was an exercise in innovation. Dr Haider's Gole Murgh Kabab comprised chicken filets that had been filled and rolled with delicious aromatic ingredients.

The flavours comprised ginger, garlic, coriander, turmeric and saffron, as well as the ubiquitous salt and pepper. It was dazzling. A small pot of pomegranate molasses was served to the side and while I found it too acidic, it did not detract from the plain brilliance of the main. The



Dr Lal Haider, chef-patron of Old Hall Restaurant in Dorrington.

chicken was tender and perfectly seasoned, the presentation was good: there was nothing not to like. Dessert was a Javahir Pullao, an elaborate jewelled rice dish that is usually prepared for celebrations like weddings. Almonds, pistachios, green saltanas, cinnamon bark, bay leaves, cloves, cardamom pods, sugar, rose water and orange were among the multiplicity of ingredients that ramped the flavour up to the max. It was stunning.

The flavours were distinct but each could be picked out. Together, they were harmonious and greater than the sum of their parts.

### Welcome

At the end of our dinner, Dr Haider left the kitchen and walked to our table. He greeted other diners and asked how we'd enjoyed our supper. He was genuinely interested in our comments, explaining the origins of recipes and engaging in a lively discussion. He made us – and other guests – feel very welcome and we were grateful for his kind hospitality.

Dr Haider's intelligent, subtle food has proved a wonderful addition to Shropshire's culinary scene. He is a graceful cook, unafraid to bring together complex spices in dishes that seem stunningly simple. His service is peerless: it's not an act, he genuinely does want people to enjoy their dinner and he's interested in what they have to say afterwards.

With a few tweaks here and there, he can look forward to moving up an elusive place when he enters his next competition. His restaurant, food and service are thoroughly recommended.

Andy Richardson

### Old Hall at a glance

**Service:** As good as anywhere in Shropshire. Dr Haider is the star.

**Food:** Exquisite. Subtle, balance, flavoursome.  
**Local/Seasonal:** Dr Haider's cuisine is about authentic Persian flavour, rather than seasonality