

Leave aside the sides

Kate Speedie uncovers an Indian restaurant in Leek that is breaking the boundaries of curry cooking and presenting a whole new approach to very, very nice and spicy food.

For me it's all about the accessories. And I'm not talking handbags and shoes here, I'm just not that kind of girl, I'm talking accompaniments and side orders.

When it comes to food, and only food can I stress, I think having a bit on the side is what it's all about.

A roast is not a roast without various veg and a Yorkshire pud, and no Chinese banquet is complete without a prawn cracker and some sesame toast.

So for me the whole point of having an Indian meal is to choose a middle-of-the-road curry for your main meal and then scatter naan breads, bhajis, poppadums and chutneys round the edges until you're faced with a veritable feast.

And it was with this plan in mind that we headed off to Qarma on Cross Street in Leek where a new venture in an old building is steadily gathering a loyal following of fans.

Taking up a vast space in a converted mill, Qarma offers what they claim is the best in Leek, seven nights a week to eat in or takeaway.

"Food is our passion, service is our obsession" the menu informed us as we settled in to the open and relaxed bar area with a drink.

And neither was an



Qarma Restaurant inside and out, in Leek's Cross Mill.

exaggeration.

The staff were friendly and chatty, willing to explain or suggest dishes and prompt with drinks and orders without being overbearing.

But the menu was truly staggering. Page after page of exciting and innovative dishes were laid out before us with descriptions and ingredients that were mind-boggling.

Chefs had worked hard to create signature dishes and house specialities so that while the odd recognisable tandoori or tikka dish was there for the taking, no discerning diner could fail to be tempted by one of the more unusual items on offer.

We opted to start with the Qarma King Prawn and the Shashlik chicken, both of which cost around a fiver and arrived within minutes.

With both dishes it was immediately obvious that the ingredients were fresh and of high quality – even under a spicy, chilled sauce with shallots and ginger among the ingredients, the flavour of the prawns managed to take pride of place.

And when our main courses arrived we were equally impressed.

The South Indian garlic chilli chicken was an absolute delight. Chunks of the freshest chicken were delicately spiced with fresh herbs and garnished with onions, peppers and chillis.

Across the table the Bangladeshi fish was going down a storm with its tender, meaty pieces of marinated fish served in a sauce made with Bangladeshi caviar, and both dishes cost less than £10.

The striking thing about both

dishes was that they were so far removed from our previous experiences of Indian food, and having previously lived within kebab tossing distance of Manchester's Rusholme district, we've had a few.

But over the years we've probably come to accept that most of the curries we've eaten have been presented in a sticky, overpowering orangey-red sauce so pungent that the ingredients within are almost irrelevant.

And presumably it is this that has encouraged us to pad out our dinner table with the aforementioned accessories in order to add a bit of variety to the meal.

But I can honestly say that at Qarma things are a little different.

We thoroughly enjoyed our dishes for what they were, and everything was good enough to stand alone without supporting side orders.

We were full without being stuffed, our food was spicy without blowing our heads off and the sauces were aromatic without being overbearing.

And there was not an onion bhaji in sight.