

A Journey of Passion, Positivity, and Panache

Posted on

Harpo Gooneratne, Founder and CEO of Harpo's Cafés & Restaurants, is a pioneering force in Colombo's dynamic restaurant landscape. From his early days as a push-bike DJ with a haversack of records to holding senior positions in five-star hotels, Harpo has learned from the best in the industry. As he marks a significant milestone in 2025, he reflects on a journey of experience, passion, and resilience—qualities that have shaped a portfolio of establishments renowned for their consistency, character, and staying power in the ever-evolving hospitality sector.

Words Jennifer Paldano Goonewardane.

Photography Sujith Heenatigala and Dinesh Fernando.



Harpo Gooneratne, Founder and CEO of Harpo's Cafés & Restaurants.

Harpo's Cafés & Restaurants has become synonymous with culinary excellence, finesse, and consistency in Sri Lanka. As you mark two decades since acquiring two of Colombo's iconic dining establishments, Commons and Bayleaf, could you share insights into your entrepreneurial journey and the evolution of your restaurant portfolio?

Twenty-two marks 20 years since we acquired The Commons and The Bayleaf, two of Colombo's most cherished restaurants. I initially managed them for the original owners, but when they exited the business, my partner and I seized the opportunity to take over. It's been a rewarding journey of growth and resilience.

My professional roots lie in the entertainment industry, where I began in the 1980s as a DJ—pedaling my way forward with a push bicycle, a haversack full of records, and a deep passion for music. I would travel by bus from Colombo to Aluthgama, often stopping at roadside tea kiosks. It was humble, but it taught me grit and the value of human connection—qualities that have shaped my approach to hospitality today. Over two decades, we've expanded to include four pizzerias, a flagship at the Dutch Hospital, a Greek restaurant at Havelock City Mall, and an outlet in Bangalore serving Sri Lankan cuisine—each reflecting our focus on quality and innovation.

We've endured the civil war, Easter attacks, and the pandemic, and economic crises. Yet, we stayed true to our values— retaining our entire team during COVID and continuing to pay staff when others couldn't.

Our current team of 150 individuals has played a vital role in our success. I stay hands-on, often working from a table at one of our restaurants rather than a closed office. Remarkably, over 90 percent of our staff have been with us for more than 16 years. That loyalty and longevity are among my proudest accomplishments.

Each of your restaurants is known for its distinct identity and unique concept. How do you identify new opportunities and develop innovative ideas in Sri Lanka's evolving food and beverage landscape?

Our restaurants are each designed to offer distinct experiences tailored to specific audiences. The Commons has a casual, youthful vibe; The Bayleaf, set in a colonial home, serves authentic Italian; Colombo Fort Café offers bistro-style dining; and SHOULDERS cocktail bar and restaurant, our latest concept, introduces Greek cuisine to Colombo.

SHOULDERS cocktail bar and restaurant, now over a year and a half old, reflects our strategic approach—filling market gaps with fresh ideas. Greek cuisine is globally loved, but Colombo lacked a dedicated space. I work closely with my daughter and Dharshi to research market needs before launching any new concept. The name "SHOULDERS" reflects the space's intimacy—where guests may literally brush shoulders—balancing originality with depth.

We prioritize immersive experiences and attention to detail—everything from décor to restrooms must reflect quality. Cleanliness and consistency are central to our team culture.

Innovation drives us. At The Bayleaf, we launched Colombo's first Piano Bar and Music Room, a retro-glam space for cocktails, tapas, and live music. We also redefined pizza offerings, moving from standard sizes to Sri Lanka's largest 22-inch square pizza with 36 slices. Despite initial resistance, we modified our wood-fired ovens to accommodate it—now a crowd favorite, even influencing global chains.

During the civil war, The Commons struggled, prompting the idea of a mobile "roti cart." Security concerns halted street sales, so we turned it into a catering service for private events, which remains popular. We also introduced Sri Lanka's first pizza truck with a wood-fired oven, bringing international trends to local events with creative flair.



What business model do you follow for your restaurant group, particularly in balancing profitability with maintaining high standards in food and service?

In this industry, every initiative must make commercial sense. The restaurant and hospitality sector may appear glamorous from the outside, but behind the scenes, it requires rigorous operational discipline and financial oversight to succeed sustainably.

Balancing profitability with uncompromising standards in food and service hinges on a robust backend system. We rely on comprehensive ERP solutions to manage everything from procurement, goods received notes (GRNs), and stock and inventory control to monitoring food and beverage costs and enforcing portion controls. These systems allow us to maintain transparency and efficiency while mitigating risks such as pilferage, a prevalent industry challenge.

Many assume that running a restaurant is straightforward. I often meet enthusiastic young entrepreneurs eager to enter the field, and I do encourage them—it's a rewarding space. However, I also advise them that success in this business requires a hands-on approach. Without a hands-on approach, it's unlikely to succeed.

A strong finance function is critical. You must surround yourself with a trustworthy, competent team that can accurately interpret profit and loss statements, manage cash flows, and identify areas for cost control and operational efficiency. Financial vigilance and operational discipline enable us to uphold the high standards we set for our brand while ensuring long-term profitability.

As a leader, I make it a point to keep informed about front-of-house operations and backend systems. This direct involvement is essential to maintaining our standards, ensuring accountability, and driving sustainable business performance.

How do you ensure consistency and quality across your multiple outlets, each with its unique concept and identity?

One key factor enabling us to maintain consistent quality across our diverse outlets is the longevity and loyalty of our team. I am fortunate to have chefs and staff members who have been with us since the early days. When team turnover is high—particularly in the kitchen—it becomes difficult to maintain consistency in food quality, presentation, and service. Stability within the team has allowed us to preserve the core values and standards that define each of our restaurant concepts.

It's about building a culture that values precision, attention to detail, and continuous improvement. We train our teams to understand and uphold each restaurant's distinct identity, and they take pride in doing so.

We conduct regular quality checks, taste tests, and internal evaluations to uphold these standards. We encourage constructive feedback—both internal and from guests. When a guest expresses dissatisfaction or offers a suggestion, we view it as an opportunity to improve. We train our teams to listen attentively and communicate guest feedback directly to our chefs and management. We often engage directly with customers to understand their perspectives, which helps us refine our offerings.

Above all, I maintain a hands-on leadership approach. I make it a point to be physically present at our properties, engaging with the teams and ensuring we follow our standard operating procedures to the letter.

Can you elaborate on how local sourcing and ingredient quality influence your menu planning and restaurant operations?

The challenges brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent economic crisis compelled us to re-evaluate our menu planning and sourcing approach. Due to import restrictions and supply chain disruptions, we had to significantly downsize our menus and shift our focus toward locally sourced alternatives. This transition was particularly challenging for restaurants like ours that offer a range of international cuisines, where authenticity often relies heavily on imported ingredients.

However, adversity sparked innovation. We witnessed encouraging developments in the local food production landscape—Sri Lankan suppliers began producing high-quality cheeses, cold cuts, and even alcoholic beverages to fill the gaps left by imports. As a result, the industry adapted and consumer preferences also evolved. We, too, have aligned ourselves with this ethos. Wherever possible, we prioritize locally sourced ingredients across our restaurant portfolio. Even at SHOULDERS, our Greek cuisine restaurant, we have committed to using local produce, except Taramasalata, a traditional Greek dip that still requires importation due to its specific composition.

Innovation drives us. At The Bayleaf, we launched Colombo's first Piano Bar and Music Room, a retro-glam space for cocktails, tapas, and live music.



Could you share more about the team that supports and drives your restaurant group?

I am fortunate to work with an exceptional team that has been integral to the growth and success of our restaurant group. My daughter is now actively involved in the business, and Dharshi has long played a key role in overseeing operations and public relations. Our team reflects a healthy balance of experience and youthful energy, blending seasoned professionals' insights with the younger generation's creativity and dynamism.

That said, I always set clear expectations. Hospitality is a demanding industry with limited work-life balance, especially given our late operating hours. When I interview prospective team members, I am candid about this reality. I tell them: if you do not have a passion for this industry, it's better not to commit—both for your sake and our guests' experience.

Our team comprises around 150 individuals across various functions—finance, marketing, operations, culinary, and service. Many of them have been with me for years; some joined as

teenagers and have since grown into senior roles, while others have gone on to work at Michelin-starred establishments abroad—something I take great pride in.

We strongly believe in internal growth. I prioritize promoting from within the organization rather than hiring externally. Providing opportunities for advancement within the group fosters loyalty and helps maintain our culture and values. While we don't operate on rigid hierarchies, we emphasize mutual respect. All team members share the same staff meals; we provide accommodation where needed.

I value the people I work with and believe investing in them is essential to long-term success. I enjoy what I do, so retirement is not on the horizon.

How have hospitality standards evolved over the years compared to what you experienced in your early career?

Hospitality is shaped by a venue's personality and, more importantly, the people who lead it. While managing The Library—one of Colombo's most exclusive venues—I focused on high standards, attentive service, and building strong guest relationships. Staff were trained to serve with discretion, creating a refined, welcoming atmosphere. Personal connection remains key. Many guests now reach out directly to my team, reflecting the trust we've built. I emphasize this culture across all my establishments. In the past, exclusivity and values defined elite spaces. After I left, some venues declined as standards dropped and membership became too open. Success in hospitality doesn't require charisma but demands hands-on management. Absentee ownership often leads to operational gaps. Being hands-on is critical in this industry.

Colombo is rapidly expanding in hospitality infrastructure, but many large spaces lack vision and capable leadership. There's still great untapped potential—for example, a night market could thrive here. Hospitality can be a major revenue generator for Sri Lanka, but only with consistent policy and a long-term strategic plan. Without it, tourism initiatives lose steam. Sustainable progress needs commitment, vision, and continuity.

What opportunities do you see for aspiring restaurateurs in Sri Lanka?

Sri Lanka has strong potential for innovative restaurants, with many already run successfully by passionate young entrepreneurs. But success demands full-time commitment—hospitality is a hands-on, daily operation. Aspiring restaurateurs need a clear vision, realistic expectations, and a strong, reliable team. Managing multiple outlets is impossible without people who share your values and dedication.

Hospitality isn't a nine-to-five job—it requires long hours, attention to detail, and constant oversight of everything from service and food quality to inventory and cost control. You may even get customer calls at three in the morning. If you're not committed and present, it's not worth pursuing. But for those who are, it's a rewarding field full of diverse human interactions.

Understanding guest psychology is vital. Many are busy professionals seeking a space to unwind. Your job is to anticipate their needs and create a welcoming environment. From my experience engaging with ambassadors and CEOs, successful hospitality lies in helping people transition from high-stress roles to relaxed, enjoyable settings.

In the end, success in this industry comes down to vision, passion, and the drive to build something meaningful.



Is there room for improvement as a country when it comes to hospitality and tourism?

Absolutely. To position Sri Lanka as a premier tourist destination, we must address outdated laws—some from as far back as 1928—that restrict operations, such as bans on serving alcohol during Christmas or religious festivals. These colonial-era regulations frustrate tourists and hinder the industry.

Running a hospitality business is already demanding, with responsibilities for staff, overheads, and delivering quality service. Instead of supporting us, current regulations often make things harder.

Colombo, with its rich culture, coastal location, and urban appeal, remains under-promoted. Many tourists skip the city entirely, unaware of its vibrant offerings. We need a dedicated task force, led by experienced professionals, to market Colombo effectively and implement long-term strategies. True progress requires visionary leadership—people who understand the nuances of hospitality and can shape practical, forward-thinking policy. Leaders like the late Gamini Fernando exemplified how powerful industry insight and genuine hospitality can be. Now is the time to put the industry in the hands of those who live and breathe it.

You head the Colombo City Restaurant Collective. How does a united voice help shape the restaurant business in Colombo?

We formed the Colombo City Restaurant Collective in response to an incident in which a fellow restaurateur was publicly targeted and received no institutional support. This incident highlighted a clear gap—there was no unified body to represent or advocate for our industry.

Since then, we've brought together many restaurants under one umbrella. The collective regularly conducts seminars on health and safety protocols, engaging public health officials to educate our teams. We also share industry knowledge, supplier contacts, and best practices, which have strengthened the operational standards across our member establishments.

More importantly, as a unified group, we now have greater lobbying power and can present a stronger voice in dealing with authorities, navigating regulations, and resisting unwarranted interference. The power of this unity was especially evident during the recent crises when we supported each other as an industry.

I've taken this further by employing a former public health inspector who routinely audits our properties, ensuring consistent standards. Ultimately, collective strength is vital, but personal accountability remains just as critical in upholding excellence in hospitality.

Tell us about your foray into the international market.

We partnered with Stanley, a reputed Indian lifestyle retailer with 60 stores nationwide, to launch our restaurant, Salone Ceylon by Harpo's within their 100,000-square-foot Bangalore store. This collaboration resonated with them, as they appreciated featuring authentic Sri Lankan cuisine in their store.

Our team in India excels in preparing traditional Sri Lankan dishes, which has helped us gain a loyal and diverse clientele, including notable entertainers and celebrities. The restaurant is in North Bangalore, a rapidly developing IT hub that expands our growth potential.

Previously, I was also among the first to franchise pizza internationally, operating in the Maldives between 2008 and 2009. While that venture was brief and ahead of its time, it paved the way for our current ambitions.

We see substantial growth opportunities, given India's status as the fourth-largest economy globally. Our successful debut in Bangalore encourages us to pursue further expansion across the country.

Success in hospitality doesn't require charisma but demands hands-on management. Absentee ownership often leads to operational gaps. Being hands-on is critical in this industry.



How do you describe your leadership style?

My leadership style is straightforward and transparent. I believe in being upfront with my team—I speak without ambiguity. I don't hold grudges and maintain a professional, easygoing approach. I've always focused on getting the job done efficiently. When I entrust someone with a task, I expect them to deliver. They should step aside and let someone else take it if they can't. I value accountability, honesty, and a no-nonsense work ethic in myself and those I work with.

Before establishing your ventures, your career began in some of Colombo's leading five-star hotels. How did those early experiences shape your philosophy and approach to hospitality?

My journey in hospitality began early. I wasn't academically inclined at Saint Thomas's College, Mount Lavinia and told my father I wanted to leave school—choosing hospitality

instead, as I loved being around people. My early DJ career complemented this passion, as both music and hospitality center on creating memorable experiences.

I trained at Clairemont Hotel School while DJing part-time, briefly worked in advertising, then joined Capri Club as a manager. I later moved to the Renaissance Hotel, becoming Sri Lanka's first Entertainment Manager in a five-star hotel. My decade there, under foreign management, was shaped by challenges during the civil war and 1988–1990 youth unrest—times when tourism nearly collapsed.

The late Gamini Fernando, then GM at Colombo Hilton, brought me in as Business Development Manager. Under his mentorship, I helped launch the Deli Market at the WTC. After the 1997 Galadari bombing and Hilton's withdrawal, I led the launch of Millennium Park—Colombo's first multi-entertainment complex.

Hilton International later offered me roles in China and Osaka, Japan. These global experiences reinforced my belief that hospitality is ever-evolving, shaped by people and crises.

Having worked through war, political unrest, the tsunami, and economic downturns, I've learned the value of positivity and teamwork. Leading in hospitality means staying optimistic, rallying your team, and building a supportive network. That sense of community and resilience continues to guide how I manage today.