Chef Augustus of the "Noblesse"

Posted on

Augustus de Hoedt is hardly your typical Sri Lankan name. But somehow it is a name that perfectly fits the role of a French Cuisine Chef. Chef Augustus has just taken over at the *Noblesse* French Restaurant of Hotel Trans Asia, and in fact is back in Sri Lanka after an absence of twelve years. Despite many job offers elsewhere and not really having any intention of coming back to the country yet, Augustus was persuaded by a member of the Trans Asia staff to bring his skills to the hotel.

He has spent the past eight years at the Regency Intercontinental in Bahrain and since 1992 has been Chef-in-Charge of the hotel's highly acclaimed "Versailles" French Restaurant.

One of the highlights of his time in Bahrain was the many occasions on which he was assigned to prepare State functions for the Prime Minister.

But Augustus' career did not start with a conscious decision to become a cook though he says he has always liked cooking. He in fact started at the Front Office and the opportunity to get into the food department came his way, by chance. He began his apprenticeship as a chef at the Oberoi, moving on to Airlanka and then to

the Hotel Ceylon Intercontinental where he obtained a lot of hands-on training.

Augustus was lucky enough to be exposed to all the visiting chefs who would pass through the hotel every year, so he was able to observe and pick up skills at close quarters. Some of the foreign chefs saw his potential in French cuisine, in particular, and pushed him in that direction. Along the way he has followed many training courses in different countries, the highlight being the one at the Grand Hotel in Paris.

For Augustus the appeal of French cuisine is its orderly step by step process, but also the fact that it allows for creativity and imaginative invention. "I take ideas from the hotel trade in some countries. other cuisines like Italian and Chinese and use a variety of herbs from different cultures. I mix methods, build up my own thing and give it a name", he says, adding that what he does is an art.

The most rewarding aspect of his job is when a customer raves about a dish. If you were to dine at the Noblesse you would be sure to meet Chef Augustus as he does his rounds, to find out if diners are satisfied with his offerings. "Feedback from customers is important, their comments good or bad help.

Taking over the Noblesse Restaurant meant coming up with a whole new menu and Augustus approached the project with a lot of planning and research. "I didn't know what ingredients were available here and what the tastes were", he says, "so I consulted with the hotel staff and went through my vast selection of menus to come up with something appropriate. So far the response has been very good". Augustus finds that certain speciality ingredients such as goose liver, caviar are not easy to come by but is arranging with the hotel to have them flown in regularly.

After a lengthy absence from the country his observations of the hotel industry are that a little bit of brushing up is needed and service and food can be improved, but basically the top hotels here are in line with the best elsewhere. The winning quality in Sri Lanka he feels is the spirit of hospitality which is genuine and not put on, as in the hotel trade in some countries.

Augustus is very pleased with his staff at the Trans Asia, for whom his arrival meant an overnight change of routine. "I changed things and expected resistance but they are very easy going and interested and they want to learn. So I might pass on some of my tricks!"

A long way down the road Chef Augustus might have plans to open his own restaurant in Colombo. And he knows unlike many who open restaurants in this city what it takes. "Restaurants start well here and offer good quality, but after a month the decline in standards sets in and they find no one coming in and have to close up."

His stint at the Noblesse will give him a good taste of staying power and what it takes to get people to come back time and again. "You have to have some kind of trick to get them back and that's what I'm going to do here!"