

Honest And Rustic



He started Nihonbashi 20 years ago with the aim of serving good quality Japanese food to Sri Lanka. This culinary journey that he set forth upon without knowing the destination has resulted in novel concepts being introduced to Sri Lanka. Ministry of Crab and Kaema Sutra are such endeavours. Dharshan Munidasa enlivened the discussion of consuming export quality seafood and produce within Sri Lanka where the best is available for the people of this country. The reputation of his restaurants is global and he has placed Sri Lanka on the culinary world map, what's more he has reclaimed the Sri Lankan Crab for Sri Lanka. He follows a simple rule where he allows the high quality ingredients to do the talking, simply said, his food is "honest and rustic".

By Udeshi Amarasinghe

Photography Indika De Silva

You have introduced high-end uniquely themed restaurants to Sri Lanka, can you elaborate on how it all started?

I had no intention of making my restaurants high-end or uniquely themed when I

first started. Nihonbashi was established 20 years ago because I wanted to have a good Japanese restaurant especially with my Japanese heritage. We took over the current building and redid the entire property. It has been a journey of discovering ideas and ingredients and that is how Ministry of Crab and Kaema Sutra came into being. I decided to start Ministry of Crab because I wanted Sri Lankans to be able to eat export quality crabs that were going out of the country and Kaema Sutra was to show that Sri Lankan food is much more than just rice and curry. I was not trying to meet the criterion of high-end uniquely themed restaurants, it was just part of the evolutionary process.

Can you elaborate on the concepts behind Ministry of Crab and Kaema Sutra?

With Nihonbashi, we started looking for unique ingredients such as good quality blue fin tuna, sea urchin and other such fresh items for Japanese food. But the cost to import such food items to Sri Lanka was very high. Therefore, I started walking along beaches, fishing villages and I realised that crab and other types of seafood were all here, but it never passed through the markets in Colombo. In my search for crab I had to go to Pettah, where I met the exporters of crab and they taught me how to identify good quality crab. That was the beginning. But at that time we were using only very small quantities of crab, which we used for the Japanese New Year takeout box called Osechi, and sold at a price of USD 200 about ten years ago. The idea of a crab restaurant is not a unique one because you get such places in Singapore with our crabs. Though many of us complained about this, nothing was done to rectify this situation.

I Decided To Start Ministry Of Crab Because I Wanted Sri Lankans To Be Able To Eat Export Quality Crabs That Were Going Out Of The Country And Kaema Sutra Was To Show That Sri Lankan Food Is Much More Than Just Rice And Curry. I Was Not Trying To Meet The Criterion Of High-End Uniquely Themed Restaurants It Was Just Part Of The Evolutionary Process.

The idea of the restaurant came about with my TV show where the episode on crab was filmed in Sri Lanka as well as in Singapore. One of my friends asked me “why aren’t you doing a crab restaurant?” Singapore was using Sri Lankan crab and it saddened me that our local crab didn’t have a reputation here. We should be proud of what we have but Sri Lankan crab is expensive.

That is how the idea of Ministry of Crab idea came about. Thereafter, I spoke to the authorities because I needed a building with a strong personality as a new, modern property would not have worked. At that point the Dutch Hospital was being renovated and I was asked to take a look and it worked. In my proposal, I stated that Sri Lankans should not be eating crabs that have been rejected by another country and that we should use the export quality crabs within the country. Kumar and Mahela used to dine at Nihonbashi quite regularly and I asked them whether they would like to a part of this venture and they both jumped at the opportunity.

Ministry of Crab and Kaema Sutra have unusual names, can you tell us how these names came about?

Ministry of Crab came up very fast, because I needed a powerful name with authority, and the name came about when I was having a discussion with a friend. I needed a powerful name to reclaim the Sri Lankan crab from Singapore. Kaema Sutra actually was not even thought of as a restaurant at first. We were brainstorming different names for a TV show at one of our weekly meetings, when Kaema Sutra came up. The restaurant came before the show so we now have to look for another name for that.

The reputation of your restaurants is global, people coming to the country make their reservations to dine at the restaurants even before they arrive. Can you tell us how you have been able to achieve this?

We haven't done much, we do not even have an online reservation system. We followed the usual, websites, social media and Facebook pages, but I believe that the old school mode of word of mouth is more powerful than anything else. The internet has helped restaurants like ours because you get to showcase your work and contact details to anyone who has a mobile device. That is very powerful and has enabled us to have a global reputation. Apart from that in the case of Ministry of Crab, Kumar and Mahela's involvement has pushed the PR element to cricket playing nations. We have also made efforts to visit Japan to cook once a year at the Sri Lanka festival.

We did a pop up kitchen in Australia for the ICC World Cup when Kumar and Mahela were playing a match in Sydney. When Peter Kuruvita was here, we spoke about doing the pop up kitchen using Australian crabs. We served lunch and dinner on Friday and Saturday, and brunch on Sunday; it was a testing ground for crab and our food. I am now determined to open a restaurant in Sydney.

Asia's 50 Best Restaurants Was Held For The Third Year Running, And Nihonbashi Has Always Been Fortunate To Be On This List But This Time Ministry Of Crabs Was Also Ranked. There Are Only Two Other Restauranteurs Who Have Two Properties On This List...

Asia's 50 Best Restaurants was held for the third year running, and Nihonbashi has always been fortunate to be on this list, but this time Ministry of Crabs was also ranked. There are only two other restauranteurs who have two properties on this list, one is a French chef in Shanghai, and the other is a Japanese chef who has restaurants in Tokyo and Hong Kong. I am honoured to be in such company as Nihonbashi and Ministry of Crab are completely different from each other, one is Japanese cuisine and the other is based entirely on crab. I have this advantage because of my dual heritage and being able to think in two languages and also dream in two languages.

The dishes themselves are unique because if you look at the Ministry of Crab, it is an ingredient specific restaurant. We are saying that we are a crab restaurant, we do not serve many vegetarian dishes but then we do not apologise for that because we are not Ministry of Carrots, we are Ministry of Crab.

The Respect For Ingredients Comes From The Japanese Cooking Philosophy. This Is Very Strong In All Of My Restaurants.

Kaema Sutra is a very interesting Sri Lankan restaurant because it takes on a Japanese outlook towards ingredients. Sri Lankan cuisine never started with ingredients. And in most instances the cooks do not respect the ingredients. For example chicken curry is made out of a whole chicken, which is cut into many pieces using blunt force, sometimes with jagged bone edges. On one side this is not appealing and on the other it is dangerous. It is the same with fish and other types of seafood as well. Everything is cut in this manner so that it is economical. Kaema Sutra has an ingredient approach, where each ingredient is treated with respect. The respect for these ingredients comes from the Japanese cooking philosophy. This is very strong in all of my restaurants.

The numerous times that we have cooked overseas has helped boost our profile. From 2005 to about 2009, I was cooking more than six times a year at certain high-end properties in the Maldives where the dinners we made were served up to USD 400 per head. These were not money-making exercises but mainly for PR.

Then two years ago we cooked in India for the international wine and food society dinner. This was an interesting one, because I travelled to Tokyo, went to the Tsukiji fish market in the morning, came back to my hotel room, wrote the menu, and sent it to India for approval because it was about USD 8,000 worth of ingredients for one dinner for 40 people. I flew with the ingredients to Colombo connecting to Mumbai! That is the kind of international exposure we have and no other chef in Sri Lanka has been able to do that.

We find many Sri Lankan hotels participating in culinary competitions, I have not won any competition and for me it is not too important. For me every day is a competition, we have to do something unique, powerful and strong so people come back. I do not really believe in culinary Olympics where you just have to shine only one day of your life, we have to shine everyday of our lives. Even in Australia this time, we went to a 500-room hotel, we occupied space in their main kitchen and we cooked inspiring dishes, thereby earning the respect of our peers.

I take my staff every year to Japan. That entire exercise grounds me because I have to do the ordering and purchasing of various items and make sure that the staff are looked after. I have taken staff members to Singapore, Japan, Australia and it is a huge exposure for them. I will be taking them to Dubai, Maldives and Bangkok as well. We are truly an international restaurant and travelling is the best aspect, though tiring, but we have to garner the interest overseas.

You are the first person to use and also speak about export quality ingredients that Sri Lankans should have the opportunity to consume.

How did this come about?

Sri Lanka has good seafood. It's either on its way to another country or it is in the sea. No one in Sri Lanka has even ever tried to improve our cuisine by using the best possible ingredients. Crab is one thing, but if you look at tuna the best ones go to Japan, then Europe, America and the really bad quality tuna end up in Colombo. Then there is a huge disparity of food knowledge among Sri Lankans. When Nihonbashi opened many people were shocked that kelawalla was tuna, because technically tuna sashimi is raw kelawalla and no one knew that. People would buy canned tuna to make sandwiches, not knowing you can buy a little bit of fresh kelawalla, put it in a steamer and make it yourself at one tenth of the cost.

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Many people do not know the features of export quality crabs. The exporters do, we know. We have enough and more people trying to sell crabs to us and sometimes they do not even let us touch the crabs, because they know the crab is not of good quality. We all need to know what we want to buy.

I do not understand why we should be buying B grade quality products, especially when it comes from Sri Lanka. We use imported canned fish to make cutlets and other such short eats and we pay such a high duty to import these products, but the quality is bad. But if we use fresh export quality Sri Lankan fish the cost may be higher but the taste, texture and freshness is entirely different. It is about knowing what you are eating. Another example of people not knowing what they are eating is if you look at lunch packets it is either fish, chicken or beef, but no one is asking what is the type of fish.

Seafood has only two types-fresh or not fresh. Quality of ingredients comes from a very Japanese sense. Just because a food item is fresh, it does not necessarily mean that the quality is good. That knowledge is not prevalent in continental kitchens, they only consider the freshness. Of course crabs are alive and there can be nothing more fresh than that. But then there are bad quality crabs and good quality crabs. As restaurateurs we should be teaching this to our customers and we should be serving the best possible ingredients that are available in Sri Lanka.

Through Ministry of Crab, people know about Sri Lankan crabs as opposed to those days when it was more about the Singaporean chilli crab.

It was actually one of our missions when we started Ministry of Crab. I really wanted to reown the crab name for Sri Lanka. It is our product. It is similar if French wine was the most popular product from Dubai as the best quality. We needed to establish a restaurant that was worthy of the ingredient as well as finding a building that was worthy of the name. The Dutch Hospital is an amazing space in terms of size and history.

At the Ministry of Crab we have many interesting posters. We have used the titles

of international publications and inserted the crab word such as International Crab Tribune, The Crab Street Journal and The Crab Telegraph-one of the headlines that we had was 'Singapore has no chilli, no pepper, no crab, Sri Lanka is the true home of chilli crab and pepper crab'. Now to say that is a very strong statement and we are antagonising many Singaporeans. But it is true. If you look at chefs around the world they are all going back to their roots and ingredients. Gone are the days that you can, import ingredients from Japan, Norway or Antarctica because your market is rich.

Crab restaurants in Singapore and Australia, are actually Chinese restaurants. Even in Singapore you do not get the sophistication that we have at Ministry of Crab. We brought in sophistication to having crab where one can have wine and dine crab with messy hands. It is funny because you find that only Sri Lankans try to eat crabs using cutlery when everyone else uses their hands and they have fun doing so. We use plates that are made in Sri Lanka from Dankotuwa and Noritake, they are very expensive but that is what we want to do. Being part Japanese I have used Noritake since I was about seven years old. And at Ministry of Crab from day one we have used Bone China. These are not cheap. I strongly feel that when you make high quality cuisine they should be served using similar quality crockery. There is no sense in making something nice and serving it on a cheap plate.

To A Certain Degree We Are Disciplining Our Guests To Be A Part Of The Experience On Our Terms, But That Is Because Of The Demand We Have. I Feel That Many Guests Appreciate It Because If We Did Not Do That, Half Of Them Would Not Be Able To Enjoy The Experience We Offer.

With that mindset, the way I portray myself and also the elements in the restaurant, every aspect has come together to make it work. Epicure, a Singapore based food magazine, wrote an article about Ministry of Crab saying 'Culinary Home Coming, Chef Dharshan brings back to Sri Lanka what is rightfully theirs'. We have been able to achieve what we set out to do, but again we are only one restaurant. In Asia's 50 Best Restaurants list, we are the only crab restaurant and more specifically we are the only ingredient specific restaurant. Therefore, we technically outranked every single crab restaurant in Singapore.

Do you personally select the ingredients? How do you maintain standard and quality throughout all your restaurants?

In the beginning when we were dealing with one restaurant, Nihonbashi, I used to visit the Mattakkuliya fisheries harbour every week, whenever the boats came in to find tuna. I was looking for a specific species, size and oil content. After doing that for ten years, the supplier too knows what we need. Additionally we have also invited them to our restaurants to show them what we do with the fish so that they understand why we require the high quality fish.

A lot depends on what the fishermen catch. Once a year, we might get a really large tuna of 120kg that has a large amount of fat content. Then we invite a few Japanese guests so that they can enjoy the fish.

We purchase crab from credible Sri Lankan exporters. We have only one crab supplier and he ensures that we get the right quality and the right quantity that we want.

Kaema Sutra again benefits from this infrastructure that we already have in place. We do not purchase frozen chicken and that ability has come from Nihonbashi. Very importantly Kaema Sutra and Ministry of Crab, both are restaurants without freezers. When I told that to chefs of Asia's 50 Best Restaurants that Ministry of Crab operates on a no freezer policy, they were shocked. But we can do that because we are an island where we have good seafood and fresh produce, but most of all we have the will and determination to do so.

While ensuring the high quality in all your restaurants, one could say that you also discipline the customer in the sense of setting a high standard. Can you elaborate on this?

That is purely stemming from demand, but it is very difficult in South Asia to ask guests to come on time and also to adhere to set times. If not, it is not only us who lose out but also the staff in terms of service charge and the government in terms of VAT. We have only three to four hours to serve dinner and generate revenue per day. We are not rushing guests to leave the restaurant in 45 minutes. We are a sophisticated restaurant serving wine and champagne, as such we want guests to take time and enjoy themselves.

There was a comment made once to me at Kaema Sutra where a Sri Lankan guest asked me if I thought I was Gordon Ramsay. I am not Gordon Ramsay, but we have matured to a point that the restaurants that I have created have a high

demand for many reasons. We have been able to get Sri Lanka on the culinary map. Yes, to a certain degree we are disciplining our guests to be a part of the experience on our terms, but that is because of the demand we have. I feel that many guests appreciate it because if we did not do that, half of them would not be able to enjoy the experience we offer.

What can we expect from Dharshan Munidasa in the near future?

I opened two restaurants last year. It has been a hectic time stabilising the two restaurants especially Kaema Sutra. It's not that we are having any issues, it is just that many people fail to understand the concept of the restaurant. I have stressed from day one that we are not a rice and curry restaurant. We offer contemporary Sri Lankan cuisine, which is defined by the contemporary Sri Lankan. Lifestyles have changed and so has what we eat.

Dharshan Munidasa Is A Trilingual Man, Obsessed With Perfection. He Is Someone Who Never Went To Hotel School, Someone Who Never Worked A Day In His Life For Anybody, But Started Cooking Because He Was Hungry.

We are starting a lunch set at Kaema Sutra and it is a very odd set. This will include boneless skinless chicken curry, two egg hoppers and pol roti-pol roti made to order with a little bit of butter melting on top, pol sambol and as the starter we have a salad made of avocado with seeni sambol inside. The buttery texture of the avocado diffuses the hotness of the seeni sambol making it a great combination. And we are calling this Sri Lankan food. Many disagree with this, but the elements are Sri Lankan. We are calling this lunch set 001 because there's going to be 002, 003 and it will continue in that manner.

We had a very closed minded approach from our customers towards Kaema Sutra, but a very open minded approach when it comes to Nihonbashi. Then, with Ministry of Crab, there were guests asking for Singaporean Chilli Crab or saying that the Singaporean version was better. I have told them that we never tried to copy that dish and today we have Singaporean guests telling us that our one is better.

We have a very busy schedule until May. I have to cook in five countries between now and May where I will be cooking twice in Maldives, twice in Dubai and once in Thailand. Maybe at the end of August we will start thinking of some interesting

concepts. But it won't be anything big, it will be an extension of what we do.

Who is Dharshan Munidasa?

Dharshan Munidasa is a trilingual man, obsessed with perfection. He is someone who never went to hotel school, someone who never worked a day in his life for anybody, but started cooking because he was hungry. The reason why I started cooking is because the food in the US was so bad. I became the person I am with Nihonbashi during the last 20 years trying to always to make a dish that tastes better. It was that determination that got us to where we are today. The other restaurants are results or creations of having Nihonbashi. It is because I had access to the best ingredients of this country, or the world for that matter at certain times. That is why we have the respect and camaraderie of other chefs around the world.

I don't do towering, colourful food and spend hours trying to make it like children playing with sand. I am very true to the ingredients we have. My food is honest and rustic.

What is your advice to Sri Lankans, because you have created something unique?

We have to stop trying to be someone else. Many years ago, Sri Lanka was trying to be the next Singapore; I do not think we should try to be the next Singapore. We have many things that Singapore does not have that is a clean ocean, paddy lands, farms and fertile land where we can grow anything. We should start appreciating that, and start paying more for good produce. The main criticism that Kaema Sutra gets is that it is expensive, but Kaema Sutra is the cheapest of the restaurants I do, Nihonbashi is about five times the price of Kaema Sutra, so is Ministry of Crab, but no one complains about it. But if we always think Sri Lankan food has to be cheap, we will never get into the realm of using good ingredients in Sri Lankan cuisine.

We Have To Stop Trying To Be Someone Else... My Strengths Came From Sri Lanka. Here You Can Take The Most Naturally Abundant And Make It Beautiful And Unique. Otherwise, We Will Be A Copy Of Something Else...

My strengths came from Sri Lanka. Even the material I used to decorate my restaurants are from Sri Lanka. Here you can take the most naturally abundant and make it beautiful and unique. Otherwise, we will be a copy of something else,

some people bring in foreign architects but they will just make the same thing as before. Even at Nihonbashi some of the food items I have created are different because of the technique that I have used. At Ministry of Crab, we do not have any starters or mains, and we are not conforming to any standard, and there is no cutlery and everyone is loving it. Garlic chili crab, is an original dish at Ministry of Crab. It is made using olive oil, garlic, chili flakes, and crab, and I use Japanese soy sauce to tighten the ingredients together. Once the crabs are finished, there is little bit of oil remaining; and the guests love to dunk in some bread and eat it. It is also about training new staff.

I feel that creativity is lacking in Sri Lanka. European dining plates do not suit for serving curries. Kaema Sutra has an interesting way of serving hoppers, we took a laveria wattiya and turned it upside down, put a banana leaf and placed the hopper. It is that simple, but the key was to turn it upside down. Is that the traditional way of serving hoppers? No, but I do not see a reason why we should use a plate because it is a light dish. Sri Lankans need to be unique, and stop trying to be someone else, we have amazing places and things to showcase and we should use that.

Final thoughts

When I opened Nihonbashi 20 years ago, it was going to be a long journey with no set destination. I never thought that the restaurant will be like this and that we will have other restaurants as well. Who knew that we would have peace six years ago. We jumped at the idea of getting a space in the Dutch Hospital in Galle and we knew that Nihonbashi or Ministry of Crab on its own would not be successful in Galle so we came up with a hybrid version of it. Hence we simply named the restaurant the Tuna and the Crab. This again shows who I am. I believe in ingredients and that restaurant is named after the two biggest ingredients that we use. I have been told that the Tuna and the Crab is the most beautiful of my restaurants. Here again we are using what we have in Sri Lanka and fusing with Japanese cooking styles.

We believe that the tourism industry will continue to improve and we have to see ourselves as one of the reasons it will improve. Restaurants should not be there to merely meet a demand. With the natural beauty, bountiful harvests of the ocean, fruits and vegetables from our lands, we can create unique restaurants that will impress Sri Lanka and the culinary landscape of Asia.



