

Inspired By The Impossible



Dharshan Munidasa believes that it is important to be hands-on in business so that one continues to learn and be curious about the new. Having worked hard to bring recognition not only to the Sri Lankan Crab

but also to Sri Lankan cuisine and the country as a whole, he continues to make strides in his own quiet way. Always taking the initiative when the opportunity arises, he believes that the 30-year conflict hardened him like so many others of his generation, and the ability to work through challenges has enabled him to be what he is today. To Dharshan Munidasa, Sri Lanka will always be home and his love for the country inspires him to go forward.

By Udeshi Amarasinghe

Photography Mahesh Bandara and Menaka Aravinda

What's next for Dharshan Munidasa?

This year during the first six-months alone we have done six pop ups overseas. The second half of this year we are planning to dedicate our time to opening Ministry of Crab restaurants around the world. We have presently signed up in three cities; Manila, Bangkok and Mumbai. I need to spend time in these places in order to open the restaurants.

In terms of Kaema Sutra, we have just moved into the Shangri-La Hotel in Colombo. Being new, the hotel is now moving into regular operations. During the first four months, that is from November to March, Shangri-La was simply a must-visit. Everyone has settled in and the first months of craziness have gone. We are concentrating on promoting the space. It has a beautiful terrace overlooking the Indian Ocean. We want to show everyone that Kaema Sutra is a great place to be; to relax after work or meet up with friends. We are catering to the Sri Lankan market as well. Kaema Sutra is not only for overseas visitors.

Nihonbashi will be 23 this year. Not many restaurants have come that far and we hope to do some interesting dinners going forward. At the same time, we want to spread what we are doing at Nihonbashi around Sri Lanka. We are happy to say that Café Nihonbashi will be opening in Kandy. We have found the right partner, they want to work with us and we want to be there. We look forward to working in the hill capital.

You have created a name for Sri Lankan cuisine globally. Can you tell us about this experience?

It is quite stressful travelling all the time. Yes, pop ups are great and are fun to

do. But, it is challenging. We are almost living on a plane. Nearly every two weeks we are on a flight cooking in another country. My staff, once they arrive in a city, only see the four walls of the hotel. We have travelled all the way to London and it is only the hotel that they have seen. However, it is an experience and it provides the window for our next steps. We always learn something new when we cook in other countries. For example, we did a Kaema Sutra pop up in London, and I made an egg hopper with a goose egg. It is a learning experience.

In 2017, we did nine pop ups in various countries. This year we have already done pop ups in New Delhi, Macau, Hong Kong, Maldives and London. We have Shanghai, Tokyo and Singapore coming up. These are interesting places to showcase our cuisine. Every time we go and do a pop up I believe we make people understand Sri Lanka and our restaurants. We are making a statement in the world that Sri Lanka has something to offer, not just our restaurants but the country. We have become unofficial ambassadors for Sri Lanka.

We always ensure that the image of our country is maintained because we are representing Sri Lanka. It is my responsibility to teach my staff as well.

The War Hardened All Of Us. We Never Ran Away, We Stayed In Sri Lanka. We Love This Country And We Want To Make A Change And Contribute To Its Betterment.

There was a dinner for seven chefs of the Asia's 50 Best in Macau. I participated from our team. One dish per chef, three of them had Michelin stars; one chef had three, another two and another one. There were no egos, it was just simple human beings having fun in the kitchen and helping each other out. It was great.

You have always stressed on serving quality cuisine, and you place great emphasis on ingredients. Can you elaborate on this?

Ingredients are the backbone of good food. The strength of our country, to have such great ingredients, is a notion that is becoming stronger. Back in the day, it was all about importing everything. However, the laws of Sri Lanka are prohibitive to import. We do not use much imports at our restaurants, we showcase Sri Lanka's ingredients.

I believe that Sri Lankans should always get the best, not the second best the country has to offer. That is my ethos. If you get good ingredients, then your dish

will be great. It is difficult to make good food out of bad ingredients. At the same time, you can mess it up so much that you can make bad food from good ingredients as well. The respect that we pay to our ingredients is key. We get the best we can and we respect the ingredients we use.

You work with many Sri Lanka suppliers, and thereby instill in them the importance that you place on the quality of ingredients. What can you tell us about this?

Our key suppliers especially the crab suppliers have always been global players. We have only one crab supplier, but before they started supplying to us they were exporters. The pricing of crabs is set in Singapore not in Sri Lanka. For us to work with them we have to understand that they are actually giving up foreign currency earnings to sell to us. Therefore, we have to ensure that we pay them in advance. When the rupee depreciates, they get more rupees for every dollar of crab they sell. Therefore, our menu too has to change with that cycle.

The Kade Paan was a good example of how something simple could become so great. It is wood fired in the traditional way. The fact that we serve that with our crabs connected Sri Lankans back with Sri Lanka.

You have initiated sustainability campaigns such as ‘Say no to fake Wagyu’ and to also protect the Sri Lankan crab, can you elaborate on this?

Many years ago, when people asked what is the difference between Wagyu and Kobe beef it was easy to answer. Today, large quantities of beef are coming from Australia and the US with the label Wagyu and everyone gets confused. It is similar to Champagne, you cannot call all sparkling wines Champagne, it has to come from the Champagne region in France. Similarly, Wagyu comes only from Japan. Other countries should look at relabelling their beef, instead of saying Wagyu. You can always sit and wait, but what I believe is you can at least try to change it. Do your best. Sometimes it will work, sometimes it will not, but you can at least try. The t-shirts with the slogan ‘Say no to fake Wagyu’ was a simple idea. We are now sending these to fellow chefs around the world, whether they wear it or not it does not matter because we are spreading the message.

In terms of the crab, we are telling Sri Lanka not to eat, catch, transport or export crab under the weight of 300g. Everyone benefits when the crabs are larger. By keeping the crab population in our waters, we allow them to become healthier and bigger, which benefits everyone. Until now restaurants have never taken a

stand on such matters, there was no message. But we are in a position to give those messages and we have the platform to share these messages as well.

No one else has dared to do things as you do and take the risk like you have, regardless of the situation, you will take the initiative. What can you tell us about this?

The war hardened all of us. We never ran away, we stayed in Sri Lanka. We love this country and we want to make a change and contribute to its betterment. There were times when survival was hard and that lesson we all know. There is one generation of us that is immune to hardships. As long as we are company owners, we are leaders and that experience during the war probably gave us strength. It is not only me there are many people on that list who actually contributed greatly at that time to become who they are today.

You mentioned that during the war you stayed in Sri Lanka. Even during your younger days with your mother being Japanese you could have easily gone to Japan. Your mother too is in Sri Lanka. Why did you decide to stay?

Sri Lanka is and always will be home. Japan is a nice a place, but for me Tokyo is too small. I have always said that, from the size of a room to everything. Sri Lankans can be negative at times; but many things that we have done and made of ourselves happened because we are in Sri Lanka.

In our restaurants, the wood, stones and bamboo that we have used are all from Sri Lanka. The stones have been collected by my mother over a period of 20 years on our estate and brought home. This could not be done if I had been anywhere else. The natural resources of Sri Lanka are so great.

Sri Lanka Is Changing And We Will Continue To Be A Part Of That Transformation And We Will Give The Best To Our Country.

Sri Lankans generally love things that are imported, as they often feel that the local equivalent is cheaper and not as high quality as an imported product. But look at our crab, it is the most expensive in the world. Sri Lanka is changing and we will continue to be a part of that transformation and we will give the best to our country.

Your restaurants are a must for those who visit the country. How did you

achieve this?

I have no clue! The timing of Ministry of Crab and its location; the idea that Sri Lankan crab is famous and also Kumar and Mahela's involvement as co-owners; the subsequent PR and international exposure all contributed to the success of Ministry of Crab. Kaema Sutra too had all of that, but I feel that Sri Lankans are very critical of Sri Lankan food being served a different way at a different price set.

We actually became more famous on the 200-rupee hopper than anything else. It is sad that it is so. We were paying a rent to the Government of Sri Lanka, and to cover that rent we had to sell hoppers at that price. Legislation was brought against hoppers; a minimum and maximum price was introduced for hoppers about three years ago. The VAT on one of our hoppers is more than the price of the hopper.

I also love people criticising me on things like this, because it shows how people have to broaden their minds. For Sri Lanka to develop, Sri Lankans have to change.

After you many crab restaurants have opened in Sri Lanka. You have given recognition to the Sri Lankan crab. What are your thoughts on this?

At the time I opened Ministry of Crab, I did not do anything new. The Sri Lankan crab was being served in Singapore and not in Sri Lanka. Not a single restaurant or hotel, had the strength or ability to do what I have done. Mainly because it was expensive. Their question was who would pay so much to eat crab?

But people still want to come to Ministry of Crab?

Yes, it is good that it continues to be so. But it has not been easy. Ministry of Crab is an experience; the food, the location within a historical building, Kumar and Mahela, and being in Asia's 50 Best Restaurants List all contributed to this.

You are very hands-on and get involved in all aspects of the business, how important is this?

That is very important, because that is the way you learn. One thing that I see in Sri Lankan entrepreneurs, especially in large companies, is they stop learning. After a while they think that they know everything. Every day is a learning curve for us. You meet someone, you learn something and that is what it is all about. Being hands on is the only way that I know how to do things.

There have been chefs before you, but they could not take their work to the next level. What are your thoughts?

It is all about learning through hands-on experience. That was lacking in them. Hands on is not only in the kitchen. It is going to the lagoons, the markets and finding your own ingredients. That is important.

Look at the life of a businessman in Sri Lanka 40 years ago. They would get to work at 8.30 in the morning and they would leave work at 4.30 in the evening. I would love to get that life back. I go home at midnight and try to be at work by 10 in the morning. My schedule is on my phone, when I wake up I know what I am doing for the day. I have had a meeting every hour today and I have three more to go. I believe that the chefs of the past were not used to that work tempo.

The Impossible. If Someone Says It Cannot Be Done, Then I Get A Bit More Strength To Prove Them Wrong. The Odds And The Challenges Apart From Wanting To Eat Something Nice Inspire Me.

The biggest asset that we have is our seafood, it is not chicken or pork or beef. To find the best seafood you have to go to the source. All our chefs wait for the suppliers to bring the ingredients. But you have to visit them and also visit the markets. The fish that come to the markets are after the best have already been selected. The best are in the sea, on the beach or on a flight going overseas. Sri Lankans always get the leftovers. I do not see that kind of culinary curiosity in Sri Lankan chefs. 20 years ago, when Nihonbashi started there wasn't a single chef in this country that had that level of curiosity.

Another reason why Sri Lankan chefs did not go to the next level is that they were confined within hotels. For 200 years, all the hotels in the world tried to beat stand-alone restaurants that do better than them and they failed. The market also said that 5-star hotels are better than stand-alone restaurants. I had to fight that. There were always questions as to why Nihonbashi was more expensive than the Japanese restaurants at a 5-star hotel. Why can't it be? Tuna in Sri Lanka, was expensive because from a 10kg fish only a 1.5kg cut could be used for sashimi. The market always thought that the best food was in hotels, but that is not true.

The buffet culture simply destroys the concept of good food. Even for a dinner function at a home, Sri Lankans believe the more dishes served it will be better. All these dishes are made on a two-burner gas cooker. Imagine the time that they

would have started to cook, about four hours before. What if you do just two curries right? That is all you need.

Do you find consumers changing?

They are more educated now. They read more and there are more TV programmes on food. We were able to teach the Sri Lankan consumer that tuna is actually kelawalla. People are liking what we do because they are more educated. We have introduced a black hopper at the Kaema Sutra and we are also going to introduce a new bites menu. I made a hamburger out of idly with a chicken patty in the middle. It will definitely be something different.

For me, knowing how to make a steak is very important for a chef. If you do not know how a rare steak tastes like, you would never be able to make it. Even the Kaema Sutra roast chicken, when it had that slight pink tinge everyone said it was raw. But that is not the case, it has been cooked to the right temperature. Today, people understand. 20 years ago it was difficult to serve sashimi because people used to categorise it as raw fish. It is different now, Sri Lanka is changing.

What inspires you?

The impossible. If someone says it cannot be done, then I get a bit more strength to prove them wrong. The odds and the challenges apart from wanting to eat something nice inspire me.

It is 23 years since Nihonbashi opened and I was 24 years old at that time. I still have not seen the younger me. There is still no restaurateur in their mid-twenties with a mixed heritage who has opened a restaurant. You also need to have the business sense to make something like this without any financial backing. I am always wondering when the next generation is going to step in. Hopefully we inspire them.

