

Sri Lanka Is Much More



There are many Sri Lankans living abroad, who have created a life for themselves and their families away from the shores of this Island. Australia is one such country

where a large Sri Lankan community resides. While there are those who do not acknowledge their origins there are many others who embrace it. It is these people that strive to show the beauty of the country and its people. To make the world understand that Sri Lanka is much more.

Peter Kuruvita is an Australian of Sri Lankan origin, he is a world renowned chef who has taken Sri Lanka and Sri Lankan cuisine beyond the shores of the two countries. Peter Kuruvita was in Sri Lanka recently on the invitation of the Australian High Commission. He together with Robyn Mudie, High Commissioner of Australia to Sri Lanka discuss the strong relationship between the two nations as well as opportunities available to strengthen this relationship further.

By Udeshi Amarasinghe Photography Mahesh Bandara and Damith Wickramasinghe

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You have literally taken Sri Lankan cuisine to the world and also portrayed the positive image of Sri Lanka through your book Serendip-My Sri Lanka with Peter Kuruvita and also the TV series My Sri Lanka with Peter Kuruvita. What was the motivation behind these two projects?
PK: Both were very personal projects but ended up being much more than that, which I am very proud of and humbled by. My father actually started the book in his last few years, he used to cook at home all the time to get the flavour of his mother's food. That was always a big mission for him. He would occasionally get it right and you will hear him screaming, "I got it, I got it", and he would write it down. This got me thinking.

In the past, in many Sri Lankan households the women stayed at home while the men went to work and most houses had black kitchens.The day would start by cleaning the rice and going to the market to buy the fresh vegetables, which were then cooked. Nothing was written down but the knowledge was passed down from mother to daughter. I decided to continue on what my dad did. There were no cookbooks that I could follow except for one so we went back to Colombo and brought all the women who had cooked for us in a big bus and we stayed at our ancestral house for a week, where we cooked Sri Lankan dishes. I just kept going to the market and bringing ingredients and asking them to cook this and that. We tried

to record everything, but the chatter was so bad you could not even hear yourself think. There were my cousins, aunties and grand aunties who had not been together in the same kitchen for about 20 years.That was actually another motivation, to bring my family together. The great thing about Sri Lankan cooking is that even though we all cook the same dishes, we all have our own way of making the dish and we all have the feeling that a dish tastes much better when made at home. That gave me the license to write a book of recipes that I remembered then trying to say is Sri Lankan cuisine. And then as I wrote all this, stories came flowing back.

The second one, that is the TV programme was a bit different. We were in Sri Lanka with Dilmah doing the first Chef and the Tea Maker and I had organised the team to film and photograph the whole event.The chefs that I had brought with me kept asking me to tell them stories, which I did not mind at all since I had plenty of stories to tell of my childhood in Sri Lanka. The director asked whether I would like to tell a few stories while he filmed and he said that we will be able to do something with the material.That was in 2010 and for two years, book in hand, we went to all the production companies in Australia and no one was interested at all in doing a show on Sri Lanka. For some obvious reasons, but I would tell them, Sri Lanka is not what you think it is, it is so much more. People did not understand that this country was very different to its closest neighbour, we wanted to enlighten them on the cuisine, the people and the country.

I Am Proud That People Feel I Have Contributed To The Positive Image Of The Country. I Am Very Happy That It Has Turned Out This Way, Because My Biggest Fear As A Person Cooking Sri Lankan Food Is That People Would Say “This Is Rubbish”.
I had given up; but Henry the producer still kept pushing and then one day he said that there is a person at SBS who wants to speak to us. When we went, I told him I am first going to ask him a question and I want him to tell me what he thought. And, I said ‘Sri Lanka’. He replied, “war and boat people.” I said if you give us a chance we will prove to you that it is not the case. They did and we started work on a very small budget, we wrote it but there were changes. This project was about finding the real people, it was about going back to the black kitchen, it was about talking to everyday people and I can relate to them very well. I am an everyday guy who can relate to anyone and I really enjoy talking about food and culture and showing people, without actually having to try how beautiful Sri Lanka is. They are very

personal journeys.

I am proud that people feel I have contributed to the positive image of the country. I am very happy that it has turned out this way, because my biggest fear as a person cooking Sri Lankan food is that people would say “this is rubbish.”

Just as you have promoted Sri Lanka and Sri Lankan cuisine in Australia, you are here to promote Australian food and wine in Sri Lanka. What can you tell us about this?

PK: I feel that we have a great opportunity here, I am here on the invitation of the High Commissioner to show Sri Lanka what Australia has got to offer. Sri Lankan produce is very good, but there are some ingredients and produce that we lack due to numerous reasons. This is where Australian produce can fit in. With the rapid economic development that is happening in this country, with so many overseas business people coming in, we need to serve a higher level of ingredients and dishes to impress the guests. Australia is not far away and we have an incredible farming background. Australian food is safe and we have amazing ingredients because we have so many different climates that gives us the opportunity to grow a diverse range of ingredients. Australia has plenty to offer Sri Lanka as Sri Lanka to Australia. This promotion will provide Australian produce to Sri Lankan chefs to work with them and turn those into dishes with Australian influence.

I am making two Sri Lankan dishes, which I have modernised and I make them at all my restaurants, which are a fish curry and my father’s pumpkin curry with vegetable rotti. This is a great combination of incredible flavours and skills of Sri Lanka and of bringing over some of those products that are unavailable here and putting them together.

What can you tell us about the economic and trade relationship between Sri Lanka and Australia?

HC: We were delighted that Peter agreed to come to Sri Lanka to take part in the promotion because to us he personifies the strong ties that exist between the two countries. He is of course of Sri Lankan origin and lives in Australia and he has been a great ambassador for Australian food, produce and wine. We are very keen to expand the relationship between Australia and Sri Lanka as well as trade and

investment. Australia has a particular strength in our contribution to the hospitality and food industry. Our fresh produce and wines are known world-wide and are award winning. We are renowned for the quality and the freshness of the produce that we export, we have something of value that we can bring to the Sri Lankan market. Peter adds value to that whole profile because of who he is and what he has achieved. He represents Australian cuisine, contemporary, modern and diverse Sri Lankan cuisine with an Australian twist because of all the time he has spent in our country.

The two things come together very well and I am delighted that he has been able to design a menu for us for the dinner that displayed the excellence of Australian produce and wine, which was brought in by Treasury Vintage, an Australian wine maker. Actually the TV programme that Peter was describing was shown in Australia in October 2011. At the time I had just been told that I was appointed as the High Commissioner to Sri Lanka, but I was sworn to secrecy,I was not allowed to tell anyone except my husband. Very serendipitously this programme was being shown on SBS and we were able to watch it on a weekly basis and talk about it and how exciting it was going to be. We were watching one episode on Kandy where Peter speaks very fondly of his father and the special memories he had when my husband suggested that we should ask Peter to come to Sri Lanka, when I was appointed as the High Commissioner. That is how the idea came about and it has all come together very nicely.

Is there any particular reason to promote Australian food and wine in Sri Lanka at this time?

HC: Not really, but we felt it was a great opportunity because we have just moved into the newly rebuilt Australian residence at Horton Place. A few years ago it was decided that the old house had run its course but we wanted to retain the place. We demolished the building and constructed a purpose built diplomatic residence. The timing has been serendipitous, Peter was available and I have just moved in, and it is a wonderful new setting to showcase Australian architecture, but also shows a lot about who we are. It is a very Australian looking house and incorporates features from Australia such as a red tile roof. We also have wide verandahs, breeze ways and high eaves, which are characteristic of Sri Lankan architecture. It is another sort of coming together of the really strong relationship we have, you can be Australian in Sri Lanka and showcase both cultures.

Peter, can you tell us about your background, your father was Sri Lankan and mother Austrian?
PK: An interesting background. My father who was from Sri Lanka travelled to England to find his fortune and see the coronation of the Queen in 1954. He missed the coronation by two days because he tried to attempt this journey on a motor bicycle. My mother on the other hand was in Austria during the last days of the battle for Vienna. Her mom was killed while holding her hand. My mother had a very difficult upbringing, a horrible step mother and father who was in the German infantry. My father was in the British Navy so my grandfather and him were not the best of friends. My parents met in London and they brought up my brothers and I to be who we are today.

My father made a lot of decisions for all of us and it was all good. When I was four he decided that he wanted to go back to Sri Lanka, to his ancestral home to basically show his family off. And our house, which is still standing in Karagampitiya in Dehiwela was the centre as there were four houses in a big compound with 22 people living in it. We drove from England overland and it was another amazing adventure just like it was on the way back, only that I was four years old. My elder brother was eight and my younger brother was still in the uterus as my mother was five and a half months pregnant when we did the trip. He was born a month after we arrived. All through that time what my father showed us was strength and determination. To do things and to get things done. To do them in a fair way and to be good to people. He always had a good story. He always taught me to take pride in who I am, in my name, where I come from, never take a backward step and to strive without hurting anyone. But he was a very cautious man as well. That caution was because he wanted to ensure that our family was looked after and so he made sure that he had paid off his mortgage and made all the necessary arrangements before he died and made sure that we had enough money to live on. This taught me that you can live life by being good to people, but you should also be fair and very strong minded.

It was my father who convinced me to become a chef. When I left school, I had no idea what I was going to do. He said to me one day in the morning, while driving the car, that he will not let me leave his sight until I got a job. We were driving down our suburb when he asked me “you were good in cooking in school right?”. I said yes and he stepped on the brake and said, “there is a restaurant, ask for a job.” I

thought he was mad, I really did. I refused and he said, “well if you don’t go in you cannot sleep at home tonight.” I knocked on the door and explained to the Chef that my father was outside and that I could not go home until I got a job. That was my first job interview and it was all serendipitous, because the Chef said that they were actually looking for an apprentice. I got the job on the spot. I was 16 years old and I simply loved it. It brought back to me all that time spent in Sri Lanka, with my grandmother and my aunties, watching people cook. I now had a new passion in what I did and from there it was all about learning. Australia had turned a corner in the 1970s and I was lucky to work with Tony Bilson, Greg and Peter Dole and Mark Armstrong-all who had the only good restaurants in Australia and I worked seven days a week for all of them. Whenever anyone needed a hand, I pushed myself to work. And all of that formed a strong background for me.

My mother was tenacious, she turned 75 in May and was in the deserts of Morocco. That is our family-we travelled, we pushed hard and love life. But we always try to be fair to each other. That is good mantra to have. I am not overly religious, but I think that I am spiritual enough, which I got from both my parents-a catholic and a buddhist.

Feasting with My Father is another programme that you would like to do. It is about your family trip by land from England to Sri Lanka. Can you tell us about this?

PK: We are trying to recreate the steps of our journey over land from England to Sri Lanka. The problem now is the danger of trying to do this, but there are a few possible avenues to do it. My mom is adamant that we should do this together. We have spoken to a few people and it is on my bucket list and I hope to achieve this someday as a homage to my father.

We Are Very Keen On Promoting Links Between The Communities In Australia And The People In Sri Lanka. It Is A Way Of Proceeding With Reconciliation. The People In Australia Want To Know What Is Going On In The Country.

It is through people such as Peter that there is a better understanding of Australia for Sri Lankans as well. How important is this for nurturing relationships between the two countries?

HC: We feel that it is critically important and we are very keen on promoting links between the communities in Australia and the people in Sri Lanka. It is a way of proceeding with reconciliation. The people in Australia want to know what is going

on in the country, a real time perspective on how the progress has been since the end of the conflict. It is really the people to people links, people who come back on family visits, people who have connections through business who talk to each other and actually have a clear understanding of how things are that play a very critical role. People like Peter particularly manage to portray Sri Lanka in all its colour and diversity, on television and through food, which is a medium that everyone understands. We are very fortunate to have 130,000 Sri Lankans or people of Sri Lankan origin in Australia. It is a diverse community and we are very supportive of them coming back to Sri Lanka to see what kind of contribution they can make to this country.

PK: I am not a political person at all. Throughout the conflict, I have never really considered anything that happened during those years. What the High Commissioner says is true, I meet many people and the most recent was on a train ride to the North where two Sri Lankan Australians told me that they were in Sri Lanka because of me. That makes me very proud. I want to change the perception people have on Sri Lanka. I want everyone to see the beauty of the people and the country. Whenever people come here the first thing they say is that they did not expect the food to be so good and how clean it is. There are many misconceptions, I ask people to forget the politics and come and see what this country is about. Sri Lankans are wonderful people who are hospitality oriented and are naturally warm. The more we can do with food or anything else to get more people here the better, because once you get them here they understand.

Once we travel to another country we change, but our history in the previous country stands still. Those who migrate continue to see their original country the way it was when they left. That is why people have to come and see the country for themselves. If we take the burgher community, they left Sri Lanka in the 1950s. Those were the grandfathers of the people who are in Australia now, but they say they do not want to go back to Sri Lanka. And I say there is so much to be proud of as a burgher, you have to go back and see. History stands still once you leave, but the country keeps growing and the more people we can show the beauty of this country to and its diversity, the better. I am all for getting as many people as possible. They can make their own decision. You cannot just watch what is shown on TV and make a decision, it just does not work that way.

I Have Noticed That Since This Show Was Aired More People Are Happily Saying

That They Are Sri Lankan. Hopefully It Is Bit To Do With The Show But It Is Mostly To Do With The Progress Of The Country. It Is Also Because Of The Way Other Countries Are Interacting Heavily With Sri Lanka Now.

There is a large Sri Lankan community in Australia, in most instances they may not refer to Sri Lanka as their home but you do not hesitate to do so. What are your thoughts on this?

PK: Maybe that was true a little while ago but that is not so today. I have noticed that since this show was aired more people are happily saying that, they are Sri Lankan. Hopefully it is bit to do with the show but it is mostly to do with the progress of the country. It is also because of the way other countries are interacting heavily with Sri Lanka now. Australians now say, hold on if the governments are talking, then we should have a look as well. Go and watch a cricket match in Melbourne, they are not scared to say that they are Sri Lankan. I do not know what to say to them, except come back and have a look and you will find that you will be impressed.

I love the strength of the people of the North, I noticed that when I was there just after the conflict. We were the first people who were allowed to film there. At first people were a bit hesitant to have us there. But they soon opened up, wonderful proud people. They just want to send their children to school and so that they get a good education. I feel that things will get better and better.

Master Chef Australia is very popular in Sri Lanka and has been a great tool for people to see the cuisine in Australia, can you tell us about that experience?

PK: It was an amazing show and they did a good job in showing that Chefs have a heart. It was the first show with a conscience. We had seen Gordon Ramsay abusing people and all of a sudden this show came out and it was well thought out. It was good to be involved in Master Chef. Obviously it was great for PR, but it was also a really good way for people to understand what a real cook was. In my first couple of visits to Sri Lanka after I had qualified, I would tell people that I am anything other than a cook. Because no one thought anything of it. I used to tell people that I am a brain surgeon or something totally different but I would not say what I was actually doing.

Master Chef has helped all chefs to be proud of what they do, but it has also made

the general public realise how hard it is to do that job. It was a good experience.

How important do you think programmes such as Master Chef are important to enhance understanding between countries?
HC: TV programmes that use a medium that people understand are really important because they show people as they are and it is a different way of understanding a country and culture. Airing of a show like Master Chef here gave the people of Sri Lanka a different perspective of Australia than they might get through another medium. It is important to build the real picture. Of course we have many avenues that we engage with Sri Lanka. Here on the ground, Australia is a major donor with the development assistance programmes. We contribute significantly to the North and East, but also to the rest of the country on humanitarian assistance and long term development as well.

There is always cricket. Cricket is a great leveler and connector. That gives people another perspective. And we try to do a number of events during the year on various aspects of Australian culture. It is a great medium and it reaches a lot of people and it gets right into the hearts and souls of the people at home. I really do think if you are going to get people to understand each other it is the connections between people. However, whether you are working in the field or opening houses that you helped to rebuild, or talking to kids about their future or whether watching an Australian programme on TV-there are multiple ways in which we convey who we are.

If We Look At The Australian Food Industry And Food Sector In General, Its Hallmarks Is Its Diversity. Australian Food Is Not One Thing Or The Other It Has A Little Bit Of Sri Lanka, Middle East, European And Pacific, We Are Really A Melting Pot, And Compared To Years Ago When We Were Growing Up In Australia, There Is A Lot More To Australian Cuisine Than There Used To Be.
PK: Australia at times could be perceived as slightly racist, however what Master Chef Australia has proved is how diverse our community really is. We have everyone from ladies in the full muslim gear to blond haired Australians to Chinese and all other nationalities. And it really conveys what Australia is because just like for Sri Lanka, there is a misconception about Australia. However, on Master Chef you can see that we have an incredibly diverse range of looks and faces and nationalities who all speak with the Australian tang and consider themselves proud Australians. I think it works both ways.

HC: If we look at the Australian food industry and sector in general, its hallmark is its diversity. Australian food is not one thing or the other, it has a little bit of Sri Lanka, Middle East, European and Pacific, we are really a melting pot. And compared to years ago when we were growing up in Australia, there is a lot more to Australian cuisine than there used to be. It represents who we are. The different layers of migration that we have had over the years has really come together. You can go anywhere in Australia and have a good Chinese, Bangladeshi or Lebanese restaurant and you can find anything you want. It really does sum up who we are. Food is another way of changing perceptions.

Can you elaborate on your success with the restaurant "Flying Fish", in Sydney. This was replicated in Fiji and your other ventures include the Steakhouse and Noosa Beach House. Can you tell us about each of these ventures?

PK: Flying Fish in Sydney was started 11 years ago, but I am no longer involved with it. About eight years ago I opened Flying Fish Fiji, which was in partnership with Starwood Hotels. From there I opened Steakhouse and I did that for a one year contract, which was at the Westin. They were doing it with another company, but they were not happy with it, so I went there and changed things around. I made it more profitable, now I am moving on to the next one, which is Flying Fish Tokoriki. I basically own the rights to Flying Fish everywhere but in Australia. Flying Fish and my name are very closely linked.

The collaboration with Starwood has many positives, because it is one of the largest hotel chains in the world. Many hotels are starting to follow suit because they want restaurant quality food in their hotels and what they are doing is inviting restauranteurs to bring their intellectual property and their brand to the hotel. This business deal works very well for me because I do not have millions of dollars to build restaurants. Therefore, a hotel can do exactly that, build the restaurant according to the design I want and to keep it within my brand. In return my name is placed within their business. Therefore, they can use it for marketing purposes. They pay for my IP and we share the profits. This arrangement works very well. Sheraton Resort, Noosa or Noosa Beach House is owned by a company called Blackstone, which is a large investment company in the US. There again I have a signature restaurant.

Sri Lanka Now Is Emerging Very Rapidly And The Number Of Tourists To The

Country Have Increased Greatly. There Is So Much Business Going On. Restaurants Are Going To Be More And More Sought After. But What People Are Going To Look For Is A Point Of Difference.
That is how my business is heading these days where I work in collaboration with large hotels. A stand alone restaurant business anywhere in the world is not easy, whether it be Sri Lanka or Paris-it is all very hard. Marketing works very well business-wise for me as well as for the hotel, because we can cross market. We can join forces. Having a decent history of being a Chef in a few big hotels has also given me the opportunity to deal with the various challenges that arise. It is very different to owning your own restaurant. In your own restaurant you do whatever you want. Within a big group you need permission from many different places to do anything. Therefore, it has taught me business-wise to work within large corporations. Together we have got a very successful model. If people want to put my name we work together and I still get to do what I love. And I have the final say in everything from the tablecloths to the waiter that is hired. This enables me to give people a world class experience with the incredible backing of a large company.

As an award winning restaurant owner, chef and culinary expert what are your thoughts on the restaurants in Sri Lanka?
PK: Sri Lanka now is emerging very rapidly and the number of tourists coming into the country have increased greatly. There is so much business going on. Restaurants are going to be more and more sought after. But what people are going to look for is a point of difference. At the moment all the hotels in Colombo do an excellent job, but we still need diversity. I think I am mostly correct that almost all the wine lists are similar. People who do business in Sri Lanka and most of Asia still like to bring their clients to hotels because that is a big deal. For all the reasons that I have said, the money is there. What we have to do now is bring points of differences. I would suggest to these hotels to start doing what Starwood has done and bring in named Chefs. Start looking at importing unique and different products. We are looking at amazing Australian wines and produce and with the influx of business and tourists this will be required.

The Australian Trade Commission Is Very Strongly Promoting Our Expertise In Food And Beverages. The Plan For The Future Is To Bring Out More Expertise In Relevant Sectors To Promote What We Have To Offer. Australia Is Top Of The Range Globally In Research And Development, Standards And Food Labelling.

Starting from now to the next five years get on with the game and start looking ahead and start making a point of difference. We need to attract business people that make the big deals. I love eating everywhere here, there is a huge opportunity to push the limits to Hong Kong and Singapore. That is where we need to go next. The hoteliers know what is required because they are third or fourth generation hoteliers. I am preaching to the converted because they know exactly what needs to be done and I am sure they will do it in the next few years.

How can we utilise the expertise from Australia to develop our sectors in Sri Lanka, especially in the areas of food, wine, essentially agriculture and production?

HC: We have a lot to offer. The Australian Trade Commission, which is also based at the High Commission here is very strongly promoting our expertise in food and beverages. The plan for the future is to bring out more expertise in relevant sectors to promote what we have to offer. Australia is top of the range globally in research and development, standards and food labelling. We have a lot we can offer to the Sri Lankan industry. The events we are running this week with Peter are a great opportunity to bring fresh Australian produce to Sri Lanka. We are very pleased to be working with Prestige foods which is very well known and established here in Sri Lanka. We are also very grateful for support from Treasury Wines, which brought a range of fine Penfolds wine for the dinner I hosted on Friday. Australia already has 15 percent of the wine market in Sri Lanka and around 50 percent in beef and lamb imports through companies such as Prestige. We are already well established as a supplier to the market, but we can develop this a lot more. Peter referred to the diversity that we can introduce and the great ingredients that we have because of the various climatic conditions; tropical fruits, vegetables, herbs, wines and all manner of ingredients including dairy of course. There is a lot we can bring to the market.

With that we would like to bring our expertise by working in partnership with Sri Lankan industries. At the moment we are working in agri business, for example, in sustainable fisheries where we are trying to take Sri Lankan businesses to Australia to show them what we have to offer. There is great potential.

Will you open a restaurant in Sri Lanka?

PK: That will depend, it is not on my current list of things to do, but someday I would

love do it. As the High Commissioner mentioned there are quite a few things that need to fall in place before people come in. It is also about getting the right local partner. There are many people who are interested in doing a restaurant with me but I do not want to do the same thing. It will be a seafood based modern Sri Lankan restaurant serving dishes where people would say “wow that looks really different.” But when you put it in your mouth and you close your eyes, it is like your grandmother’s fish curry. That is something we have not managed to do in Sri Lanka where the beautiful flavours in curries are made into a contemporary dish. That is what I am aiming to do. And I think these are some of the areas that will really help the Sri Lankan cuisines to grow.

I love the opportunities that are available here. Hopefully many other Australians will see the same and I am sure some already do.

Will we see greater investments from Australia?
HC: We are certainly pushing that and Sri Lanka is very interested in a whole range of sectors. There is tourism and hospitality, agri business and we are very much engaged in eduction as well. We are already in the market in many different points and we would like to see these points diversifying and growing. I have another two years in the country and my hope is that by the time I leave, Australian businesses here will be much bigger and stronger in a wide range of sectors. To make that happen we would like to see continued openness in the market, stronger governance and clearer rules in engagement in the various sectors. All of this will help to bring Australian companies to Sri Lanka. There is a great deal of interest.

Due to our regional proximity and as we are both members of the Indian Ocean region and we share membership of various organisations such as Indian Ocean Rim Association, there are many ways in which we can familiarise ourselves with each other and build on what we already have. Therefore, I feel the future looks very bright.

You have also worked as a brand ambassador for Dilmah and have developed the concept of tea gastronomy, what can you tell us about this?
PK: Dilmah was launched in Australia, 26 years ago. At that time I was the head chef of a restaurant, my name was at the bottom of the menu. I got a call to the

kitchen saying that there is a gentleman who would like to talk to me. When I went out, it was Mr Merril J Fernando. He looked at the bottom of the menu and said “Kuruvita, Sri Lankan name.” We had a little chat and he said that he was in the country to launch his company. He is an amazing person who realised that Ceylon Tea as it still called today, was being bastardised at that time by being blended with other countries teas by the multi nationals and was being stored in large warehouses. What he really wanted to do was to grow the packet at the source and then export it himself. He started a company against all odds. In the 1950s, Sri Lankans were not allowed to taste tea because the British said that the Sri Lankan palette was not good enough to taste tea. If you could taste tea then you are at the next stage of tea production and you can start making your own tea. He broke all those rules and he picked Australia to come and launch his tea. He has always had an amazing affinity with Australia.

My Business Education Cost Me More Than 350,000 Dollars In Failed Businesses And Mistakes. But I Now Feel That I Learnt How To Do Business The Hard Way… You Do Not Have To Have A University Degree To Be A Good Business Person.
The company is called Dilmah- Dilhan and Malik-the names of his two sons brought together. The three of them have worked to create an outstanding iconic Sri Lankan brand, which is known worldwide. Time went by and he would occasionally come in and then his sons came back from university from England and took over the marketing and rebranded the product-the green box that we all know with the ‘T’ sign. Malik and I met in 2004, one month after the tsunami, and he and I started talking and we did a few projects together. He wanted to bring back the real high tea so that people understood tea a little bit more. He also wanted to follow his father’s dream of ensuring the purity of Ceylon Tea and that people understood what pure Ceylon Tea was, but he also wanted to start cooking with tea. One day, 32 boxes of tea-the new T series boxes turned up on my doorstep.

I said I am too busy but let us pick eight chefs and send them four boxes of tea each and get them to come up with their own recipes. Then he came up with the idea of Chef and the Tea Maker. I chose eight of the best chefs in Australia, sent them four types of tea each, and this amazing collaboration started where they created all these dishes and we came up with a recipe book. They all came to Sri Lanka, which was in 2007-2008. They were hardworking chefs who were used to working hard but Dilmah introduced them to the human side of tea. And also about life.

We travelled extensively and introduced these people to tea and the humanitarian work that Dilmah was doing through the MJF programme. We also wanted them to understand tea and they became the ambassadors for tea culinary-cooking with tea. From there it has grown into this amazing venture. There are three cook books now. We are in a worldwide cooking competition, back in Australia next year, going to Sydney and Melbourne. And then the worldwide finals after three years of judging around the world. We have travelled all over the world and brought people together to appreciate tea. Next year, the finals will be held here at the New William Angliss School. William Angliss School is another great initiative from Australia. It has added another dimension to education in hospitality.

And to me, Mr Merril J Fernando is probably like my second father. He is an amazing man. Dilmah does not talk about the amazing things that they do for people in Sri Lanka. And they spend a lot of money looking after some of the less fortunate people of this country. They have started homes for blind people. There are many projects that the MJF Foundation has done. And all of it is centred around Sri Lanka's most famous export-tea. I call myself a family friend rather than an ambassador for tea. I enjoy working with them and I love their passion. And I feel that has gone across both countries. They have come to Australia and that passion has just spread across. They have done so many projects supporting many great functions in Australia as well as in Sri Lanka. I am very proud and happy to be associated with them.

We Are Really Good Partners… We Have A Long Way To Go Together In Future—Whether It Is In Business Investment, Dialogue, Development Or Whatever It Is. Australia And Sri Lanka Are In A Very Close And Constructive Relationship.

Final thoughts,

PK: My education did not last long at school. But my business education cost me more than 350,000 dollars in failed businesses and mistakes. But I now feel that I learnt how to do business the hard way. I think this is all about being good to people, and being honest but also shrewd and understanding about what you are getting yourself into. You do not have to have a university degree to be a good businessman, but it would probably make the path a little bit shorter.

HC: We are delighted to have Peter here. He is an excellent ambassador for Australia, Australian food and cuisine. The promotion showcased not just fresh food, produce and wines but also the very strong people to people links between

Australia and Sri Lanka. I hope people will look at the opportunities to engage more closely with Australia. But they will also take away the message that we are really good partners. and that we have a long way to go together in future-whether it is in business investment, dialogue, development or whatever it is. Australia and Sri Lanka are in a very close and constructive relationship. That is what we want to continue.




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