

The Artful Balance



Managing Director of Benjarong (Pvt) Ltd, Lionel P Fernando tells Harin Fernando of the 15-year journey of Sri Lanka’s first authentic Thai restaurant – Siam House.

The beginning?

I completed my undergraduate studies as a Bachelor of Commerce, then qualified as a char-tered accountant.
With the assistance of my long time friend Suvit Sakhuma, in 1993, we set up a joint venture company Benjarong (Pvt) Ltd. under the trade name ‘Siam House.’ Sakhuma, a Thai national, is an expert on everything to do with the hospitality industry and commercial food catering.
Siam House was our first business. We opted to theme Siam House as serving ‘Authentic Thai speciality cuisine in Sri Lanka.’ We operate with the blessings of the

Board of Investment of Sri Lanka and the Ceylon Tourist Board.
Siam House is a Sri Lankan – Thai joint venture and our first venue was on Duplication Road with a seating capacity of 150.
We shifted twice along the same road over a period of six years and we finally arrived in 2004 at Melbourne Avenue, in Milagiriya.
Our present location has a seating capacity of over 250 and offers air-conditioned comfort for all guests. We have family rooms, a spacious garden and spaces that can be converted according to the needs of our guests. Banquets, cocktail parties, and celebrations are all possible with the flexibility of our premises.
In addition to this, for the past 15 years we have also been operating a very popular take-away and delivery service within Colombo City.
Quality is important to us at Siam House, but this is not the only aspect we look into. We have taken a lot of effort in ensuring that the dining experience goes beyond satisfactory; from the classical Thai décor to the background music and exotic ambience.

” When I Look Back At Our Beginning To Our Present Status As An In-Flight Catering Organisation, I Am Happy Indeed. “

Why Thai Food?
The main reason was the professionalism and the experience of my business partner Sakhuma. In addition to this, Thai cuisine is world-famous for its taste and variation.
Thailand is often referred to as the world’s kitchen. This can be credited not only to advanced agriculture and agribusiness techniques that they employ, but also to the artful balance of the tastes. Thai cookery is a skilful balance of culinary skill with visual presentation, bringing to the tongue a heady mix of sweet, spicy and sour, all in one.
Our senior executive chef, a Thai national, has been with us for the last 15 years, along with four other assistants. We import all our ingredients directly from Thailand to ensure that we provide our guests a quality and authentic Thai meal.
Today, despite the high ‘cost of living’ we still offer excellent value for money to our esteemed guests.
Our goal is to ensure that every guest has a ‘memourable dining experience’ and in this regard our team is very passionate about service delivery. Our loyal clientele is a testament to the achievement of our goals.

To the present?
Today we have established our catering arm under the trade name ‘S H Food

Services.’ It specialises in large scale catering.
S H Food Services operates a state-of-the-art bakery and commercial kitchen in Andiambalama, close to the international airport. We have an experienced team of chefs and catering experts who even meet the requirements of in-flight catering.
Siam House has also spread its wings, with a second branch at the Bandaranaike International Airport. Our research revealed that for over the last 30 years there has been only one vendor involved in catering within the airport.
Siam House is located in the departure lounge and breaks the mould in terms of choice with Sri Lankan, Western and Thai cuisine all on offer to our global clientele of travellers. We share around 50% of this market within the airport premises at present.

Your involvement with the Sri Lanka Thai Business Council (SLTBC)?
Following an in-depth assessment of what the role of the council was going to be, a group of business organisations dealing with Thailand including Benjarong (Pvt) Ltd set-up the Sri Lanka – Thailand Business Council in the year 2000 with the guidance of then Thai Ambas-sador, His Excellency Dr Thankur Phanit.
As the present President of the SLTBC, I wish to promote trade, investment and tourism be-tween the two countries. I would like to invite any business organisation or individual who has business dealings with Thailand or expect to set-up a business in Thailand to join us.
There is a lot we can learn from Thailand, especially in the field of agriculture and agro-techniques, due to advance technology possessed by Thailand.

To the future ?
We are very much interested in the South Indian market and have already approached the Thai government for technical assistance in setting up a Siam House in India.
We are confident of commencing operations within the next year. We also plan to introduce ‘Siam House’ branded cooking products etc. to the local market.

Advice for budding entrepreneurs?
You should have a great deal of determination and courage.
You cannot expect a profit as soon as you start. You have to make sacrifices; you have to or-ganise, plan, and get a team on the correct path while gathering together all the factors that will contribute to a smooth running of the business.

Most memorable moment over the last 15 years?
23rd May 1993, the day a Chartered Accountant and a food industry expert,

established Sri Lanka’s first authentic Thai food speciality restaurant.
I also felt a sense of achievement when a number of magazines, both local and foreign, recommended Siam House as a ‘must visit’ for authentic Thai cuisine.
And most recently when we opened a branch at the Bandaranaike Airport, I felt thrilled perhaps in my own little way of making a global presence. When I look back at our beginning to our present status as an in-flight catering organisation, I am happy indeed.