A New Chapter for Nihonbashi at Colombo Port City

Posted on

Some restaurants become synonymous with their owners, who define their identity. And so it’s with Dharshan Munidasa and Nihonbashi. Together, they make an identity for the best Japanese cuisine in Sri Lanka. After a successful almost three-decade run on the island, his first restaurant begins a new chapter at the Colombo Port City, signaling the beginning of an incredible journey in an iconic location poised for takeoff.

Words Jennifer Paldano Goonewardane.

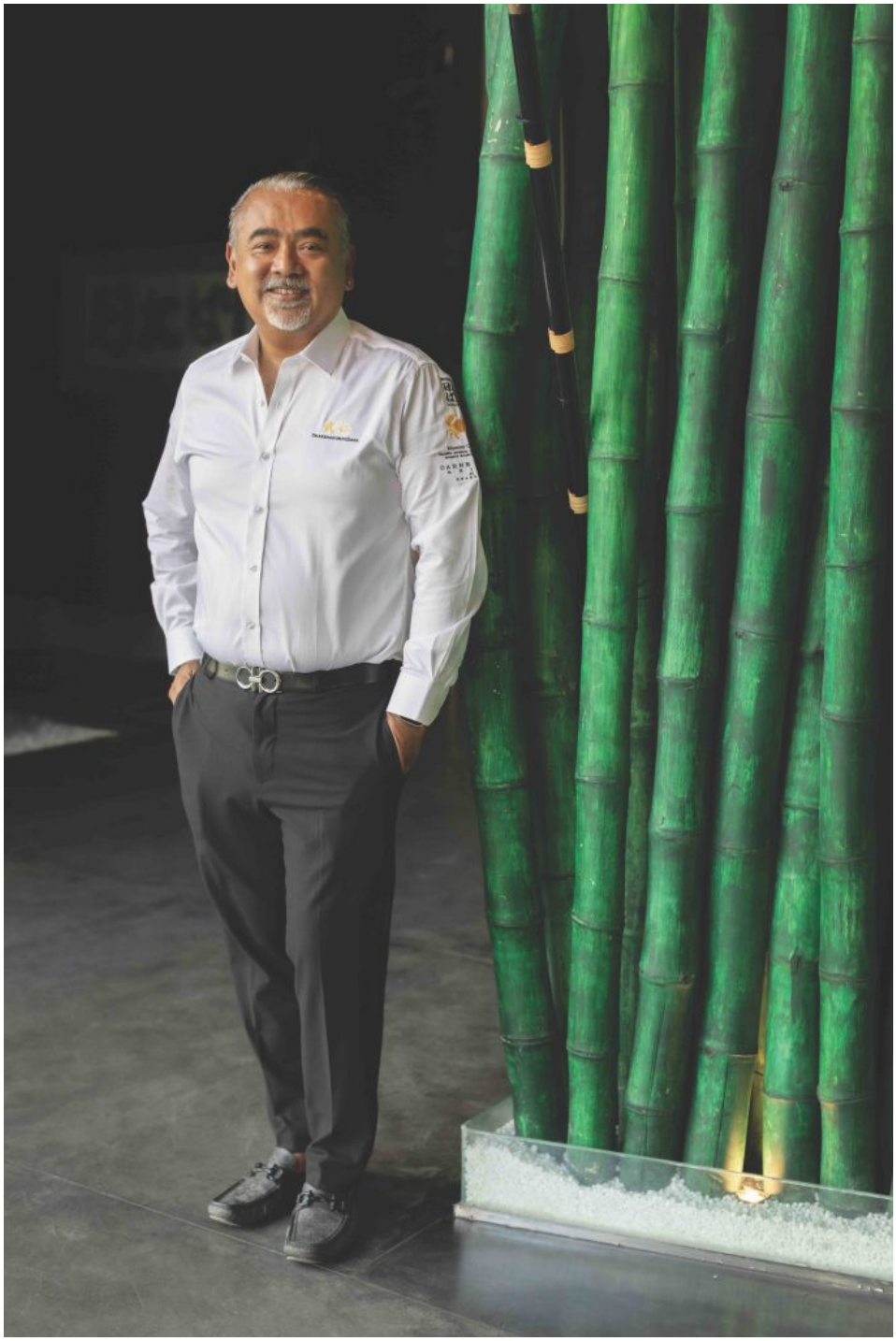
Nihonbashi is Dharshan’s fiefdom, where Japanese food churns out in all its glory. Presentation is vital to his food fare, from sushi to sashimi to the staple tempura and umami-filled bites. It’s a commingling of traditions and rituals, a celebration of a country’s food culture where texture, color, and flavor unveil a culinary art. Nihonbashi is the nobility of Japanese food in Sri Lanka, elevating its appeal in the island’s dining sphere and creating experiences that articulate a culture where food is integral. Dharshan changed the local food landscape for the better. Beyond introducing authentic Japanese food and burgeoning love for it, he also taught people that Japanese food is about fresh ingredients and attention to detail.

Nihonbashi was Dharshan’s foray as a restauranteur. He dared to do so with Japanese cuisine. From Galle Face Terrace in 1995 with Japanese expats as his regulars, Dharshan gradually wound his way into the Sri Lankan palate while building a global reputation around Nihonbashi. For Dharshan, the rise of Nihonbashi to Asia’s 50 best, not just once but twice, is an endorsement of his brand and exponential growth over the years, even under the gravest of country circumstances, a testament to its individuality. At the cusp of completing three decades, Nihonbashi has unveiled its next chapter at the Colombo Port City, its design, a labor of love by Dharshan.

Nihonbashi at the Colombo Port City is unmissable, and so is Colombo’s landscape from Nihonbashi. Walking past a beautifully landscaped garden through eighteen Torri gates of vivid orange leads the visitor to an interior that showcases the aesthetic of Japanese minimalism. The eighteen Torri gate-like arches have a story. They stand for Dharshan’s eighteen restaurants in Sri Lanka and abroad, and the pathway under the arches leads the guest to his nineteenth. Governing his design ethos is symbolism and connection, some personal and others cultural. But he, as the architect of his fiefdom that he proudly calls Nihonbashi, departs from the norm and turns to his Sri Lankan roots to source the quartz, the bamboo stalks, the furniture, fusing local materials to create a space embracing Japanese culture and within Nihonbashi at Port City one realizes that Dharshan has achieved his objective. It is large. It exudes a very Zen-like ambiance, organized, minimal, and devoid of excessive details. Like the food he serves, there is balance and harmony in the details, creating a space for warmth and relaxation.

The unique entrance with 18 vivid orange Torri-gate like arches.

An outdoor dining area that allows diners to enjoy a breezy ambiance and the Colombo’s latest landscape.



Dharshan Munidasa – Starting a new chapter for Nihonbashi at the Colombo Port City.

The eight private rooms are of different sizes, principally small, some fit for groups

of four to eight and others for twelve to twenty-four. They are themed. They are like serene retreats, artistic yet simple in expression. Two rooms, Ikebana and Bonsai, boast of tatami-style dining. Ikebana is inspired by Dharshan's mother, an Ohara-style Grand Master teacher of Ikebana. With her 1958 certificate adorning the wall, the room overlooks a simple Japanese-inspired indoor garden of rock stones and foliage, complementing the less-is-more approach of sophisticated minimalist interiors. The Zen-style garden adds a calming feature to the ambiance of simulating nature's stillness. A bonsai plant and an unusual wall piece of a shoal of fish are the only ornaments in a sparse space where light cuts through the glass separating the room from the serene and secluded rock garden. The minimalist aesthetics continue in the western-style seating room of Samurai, which has a treasured family heirloom of a painting of a samurai warrior. The Jinbaori samurai vest displayed on the wall is an apt tribute to the room's theme, while the rock-embedded wall completes the simple décor. The most impressive of all the rooms is Chikurin, decorated expansively with one thousand forest-green bamboo stalks that make the room's walls evocative of a sprawling bamboo forest. Its staidness is unmissable. It is a must-visit private room reminiscent of Japan's famed Arashiyama Bamboo Grove of Kyoto. Chikurin has a deeply restorative experience; its nature lulls the mind and brings a sense of calm to the soul.

Whiskey Room is a western-style dining room for four, which features a selection of premium whiskies. With Sri Lanka's most extensive collection of Sake, the Sake Room is a private dining area for four. Themed around burgundy, the Wine Room for four boasts a walk-in wine cellar of some of the best wines. The most significant private dining space, the Tachi Nomi Bar is inspired by Japan's drinking culture of standing bars that can hold twenty-four and could be one of the liveliest places at Nihonbashi, with only a grazing table and no chairs, a collage of Japanese vintage posters adding to the energy of the theme, a place for private functions, to gather around the tables over a curated menu of sushi, sashimi, and small plates.

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Unveiling a creative and stylish Japanese cuisine.

Nihonbashi’s cuisine is a masterpiece of textures, colors, and flavors, unveiling a culinary art that’s nothing short of perfection!

One thousand forest-green bamboo stalks adorn ‘Chikurin’.

The artistic and simple ‘Ikebana’ room is inspired by Dharshan’s mother who is an Ohara-Style Grand Master Teacher of the art.

Outside, the thirty-foot-long bar, made out of nine rocks sourced from Galaha, Kandy, each weighing a ton and handcrafted, is called Lost in Translation, named after the famous Academy Award-winning movie of the same name. For Dharshan, choosing the name was deliberate, not so much for the movie’s plot, but to make a connection to Japan with an English name. The bar is not only exceptional for its heavily stoned appearance, but it also provides a vantage view of the conspicuous and magnificent buildings, the city’s landscape, of stunning design, the lotus tower peering through skyscrapers, an embodiment of the aesthetics in urban architecture. Against the night sky, the setting is awe-inspiring. In a commingling of the traditional with the modern, patrons can use the tabs provided by the management to place their order and interact with stewards through WhatsApp or WeChat, ensuring a seamless dining experience while enjoying the music of choice by connecting to the Bose or Harmon Kardon speakers. The relocated Nihonbashi boasts a large Yakitori grill, one of Asia’s most significant. In Dharshan’s unique style, the restaurant hopes to grill more than bite-sized chicken pieces. He plans to grill an entire bird on the traditional grill. After all, who doesn’t love Japanese Yakitori? It is Dharshan’s way of upping the experience quotient for his patrons, a

wonderful dining experience where one witnesses tradition and history and ingenuity exquisitely crafted for the palate. He is upbeat about the potential of the new location in the future, plans collaborations with Japanese chefs, and hopes to invite foreign bartenders.

> Governing his design ethos is symbolism and connection, some personal and others cultural.

The eye-catching traditional Japanese umbrella is part of the interior – another of Dharshan’s master ideas.

Apart from the eight private rooms, the restaurant’s open dining area.

Nihonbashi and Dharshan have received numerous awards and accolades, solidifying their status as a source of national pride.

The beauty of Nihonbashi, according to Dharshan, is that they speak to people's palates and minds. They do what they do with love, passion, and energy. Their design ethos is undefinable, a creation of a mind tutored in dual cultures that transferred the philosophy of Japan's food culture and design, its level of balance, a sparseness that creates order and harmony into Nihonbashi. Thus, he is the creator of his masterpiece, a project that birthed everything Japanese with Sri Lankan material and loads of help from local builders. He has amalgamated a plethora of Japanese elements into a core that he says doesn't exist anywhere in the world, and guiding his design journey was a mission to create a standalone Japanese restaurant in Sri Lanka that would wow the world. Dharshan says he wants Sri Lanka to shine through Nihonbashi. For his patrons to declare that they have not seen anything like this anywhere else. For him, Nihonbashi is a source of pride for Sri Lanka, more than a personal trophy, a crown that the island can wear proudly. Nihonbashi is not a mere restaurant serving Japanese food but an ambassador of

culture, design, and more, says Dharshan.

The elegant burgundy wine room.

The delightful Sake Room with a private dining space features an extensive collection of Sake.

As you enter Port City Colombo, Nihonbashi is an unmissable iconic dining space, allowing patrons to experience its culinary journey.