Affordable Fine Dining

Posted on
Exquisite presentation

I knew I was going to like Grande Gourmet at Nirj’s when, after I’d made my reservation, someone took the trouble to phone to tell me that the restaurant had no liquor licence. I was welcome to bring my own wine and no corkage would be charged. Such attention to detail was impressive.

Words Royston Ellis

Traditional Belle Èpoque decor for
fine French cuisine

The opening of Grande Gourmet at Nirj’s caused a stir last summer thanks to the identity of its owner, one of Sri Lanka’s most famous men-of-the-world. Nirj Deva was once a member of the British Houses of Parliament and now sits in the European Parliament. In Sri Lanka he has a reputation as an ebullient host, a punctilious connoisseur and a passionate promoter of causes and people he believes in, as well as being a company director and a generous friend. That he should add restaurateur to his long list of achievements has left Colombo society agog.

He further stunned Colombo’s cognoscenti by announcing his intention of introducing affordable fine French cuisine to Sri Lanka. Has he succeeded? For people who appreciate French cuisine, a three-course meal of exquisite flavour and presentation costing around Rs3,500 is well within a gourmet’s budget. Succeed he certainly has. The Grande Gourmet also offers special rates for tourists who are enjoying a holiday in the country.

The first sign of being in for a memorable dining experience is the glass-walled kitchen you see even before entering the restaurant. It reveals not just the competence but also the confidence of the be-toqued chefs, happy to be observed in their endeavours. The next surprise is in the décor of the dining room, where gold-framed prints of times gone by decorate wine pink walls, mirrored columns twinkle with light, and painted ceilings offer a vision of blue sky and floating clouds.

As the steward spread the napkin on my lap I realised with a frisson of satisfaction that it was the correct size for traditional French dining (22 x 22 inches) and – such sophistication! – had a buttonhole at one corner, as napkins presented in first class on the best airlines always have.

A basket of hot breads and a dish of spreadable (not hard straight from the fridge) herb butter was quickly presented, together with a single plump, deep fried, local version of whitebait, tail up in a liqueur glass of spicy mayonnaise. It was an intriguing palate teaser.

A mistake by the steward in giving me the lunch menu helped me devise a dinner to my own taste. Since I didn’t fancy the salad or seafood starters proposed for dinner, I chose as my starter the mixed vegetable ragout with stuffed tomato from the lunch main course menu. It was an inspired choice for a starter, if I do say so myself: mushrooms, spinach and tomato, and crispy florets of cauliflower and broccoli, enhanced with a smothering of warm and creamy cheese sauce, which I mopped up with bread, the way the French do.

Another touch of French style was the absence of a cruet on the table.A good French chef would have a tantrum if guests spattered his creations with salt or pepper. The chef at Grande Gourmet is Sri Lankan, not French, but Chef Rasika de Zoysa has experience of cooking around the world and his dishes are meticulous in flavour and presentation.

As my main course I chose a dish that, until then, I had never had properly prepared

in Sri Lanka: herb-crusted rack of lamb pan-baked and served on a tian of vegetables with a drizzle of rosemary. There was also a generous helping of dauphinoise potatoes. The lamb was perfection, tender enough to cut with the butter knife, with meat so full of flavour, I confess to picking up the bones with my fingers to gnaw off the last morsel.

To crown this superb dinner the chef produced almost crisp Crêpe Suzette with the right hint of liqueur and grated orange peel. It was such a pleasure to enjoy this exclusive ambience that befits grand cuisine in the opulence and grandeur of the beautiful dining room. But it’s unlikely to be exclusive for long as the word spreads, so go before the hoi polloi discovers it.

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