Cornering The Market

Posted on
Colourful veggies

The carrots are scrubbed, the tomatoes are shiny, and the aubergines look like they've been varnished. The market at Wellawatte displays the freshest, finest produce in Sri Lanka.

Words Royston Ellis | **Photographs** Mahesh Bandara and Vishwa Tharmagulasingham

Pumping coconut oil

Of all the markets I have visited in Sri Lanka – from the dank cavern at Nuwara Eliya to the mist-enshrouded field at Haputale – the one at Wellawatte is the most impressive. It's not just the variety of produce on offer, but the people too – stern-eyed Colombo housewives, moustachioed pensioners, brisk fishmongers – that make a visit to the market such a fascinating experience.

Wellawatte is in Colombo 6, a suburb of the capital squeezed between Bambalapitiya and Dehiwela and bordered on the north and south by the so-called 'Dutch' canal. The waterway was originally carved out by the British in 1872 but since it didn't function properly at first, locals dubbed it 'Layard's Folly' after the British government agent of the Western Province at the time. The problems were eventually resolved and boats brought fruit and vegetables to the market along the waterway from Piliyandala and beyond until the 1950s. Produce is now delivered by trucks each day before dawn.

There has been a market on this site selling the best produce of the land and sea for generations. Business expanded with the opening in 1888 of the Ceylon Spinning and Weaving Mill in Wellawatte, and when this enterprise was bought by a Bombay businessman in 1899, over 600 Tamil and Muslim mill workers came from India to join the Sinhalese of the neighbourhood. Although the mill has since closed, the descendants of these workers still populate the area, many of them shopping regularly at the market.

The old market was demolished and replaced in 2012 with a gleaming new five-

storey building; the ground floor has 83 stalls, while th upper levels are a car park. Where else in Sri Lanka can you park your car, go downstairs to do your shopping and have a freelance porter carry everything back up to your car?

> There has been a market on this site selling the best produce of the land and sea for generations

Access to the market is not obvious from the Galle Road. There’s a pawnbroker’s shop at the entrance and, when I visited, construction of an annex was underway. There is a ramp for wheelchair users, and steps that lead into a hall bustling with business.

Clearly a stranger, I am greeted politely by an optimistic tout but then left to my own devices as I wander around. Stallholders smile a welcome and praise the quality of their wares, answering questions eagerly and letting me handle and choose the vegetables I want.

> Vegetable stalls fill the centre of the hall, each one displaying the cleanest produce

The hall itself is small compared with other town markets, but it’s amazingly clean (the floors are tiled) and easy to navigate. Turning right on entry, I discover the area for pulses and curry stuffs, including a stall with a score of different types of rice. Opposite, a chap merrily chops coconuts in half then shreds the flesh in a jangling machine before a gaggle of waiting housewives.

Vegetable stalls fill the centre of the hall, each one displaying the cleanest produce I have seen outside a kitchen. They are super fresh too, having arrived that morning from up-country distribution centres. The bunch of coriander leaves I buy is as large as a wedding bouquet and smells just as sweet. The vendor weighs my chosen veggies, packs them in plastic bags, then gathers the bags together in a wicker basket before totting up the bill.

> The hall is amazingly clean (the floors are tiled) and easy to navigate

There are stalls devoted to exotic fruits like custard apples, soursops, pomegranates and rambutans, as well as ripe papayas, avocados and melons, and ones with names that have no English translation. Another stall is piled high with betel leaves artistically arranged like a wreath.

On the northern side of the market I find oil pumps, where you can fill your own bottle with three different grades of coconut oil. At the back part of hall are the meat and fish stalls. Rubber carpets warn of the potentially slippery floors and cheerful, rotund men with beards sell beef, mutton and chicken.

> There are stalls devoted to exotic fruits and ones with names that have no English translation

The chicken shop is not for the squeamish. While an energetic butcher skilfully portions freshly slaughtered chickens at the counter, the squawks of birds awaiting their fate can be heard from out back. The fish counters are the most intriguing for the variety of fish and shellfish on display, all clearly priced. I can’t resist buying three baby sharks and am amazed when the fishmonger asks if I want them skinned, gutted and cut into pieces, at no extra cost.

> What makes Wellawette such a worthwhile place to visit is the ethnic diversity of the area

What makes Wellawette such a worthwhile place to visit is the ethnic diversity of the area. It informs the produce available at the market – catering for the different diets of Muslims, Hindus, Christians and Buddhists, the stalls stock every conceivable locally grown fruit and vegetable – but it does more than that. It also creates an atmosphere of mutual respect, with shoppers and vendors, no matter their backgrounds, interacting in a friendly and open way.

