

Distinctly French

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The trendy dining area

Though having opened just a year ago, Café Français by Pourcel already glimmers with the fame of being one of Colombo's top spots for mingling. Soothing music and chirpy chatter bounce off the walls of this bistro serving the best flavours of Southern France. Co-founder and director Jean-Charles Toussaint tells us about his experience in living and working on this paradise isle.

Words Keshini de Silva **Photographs** Mahesh Bandara and Vishwathan Tharmakulasingam



Jean-Charles Toussaint, co-founder and director of Cafe Français

Clad in comfort and wearing a jolly smile, Jean-Charles Toussaint leads us to the elegantly styled dining area of the bistro. Clearly much thought has gone into the

intricacies of the interior and he confirms that focusing on the finer details is of great importance to him.

Jean-Charles arrived in Sri Lanka two years ago, with the sole mission of establishing Sri Lanka's first French restaurant. "It was very difficult because I came alone and I didn't speak English fluently. But I soon realised that, in Sri Lanka, if you stay with the people throughout the process, you can get the job done," he says.

Soon after the restaurant was built, Jean-Charles set about the task of filling his kitchen with the lively flavours of the South of France and the finest produce from France and Australia. For this he enlisted the help of his friends and now partners, twin brothers Jacques and Laurent Pourcel, chefs who held Michelin stars in their native France and Olivier Chateau. Jean-Charles is a firm believer that you need a French chef and owner to run a successful French restaurant.

"In France we do things in a different way. For example, service is different. If two people are having a meal and one has finished, in Sri Lanka waiters take the plate away, but in France we wait until everyone has finished their meals to clear the table," Jean-Charles explains.

The attention to quality correlates with high prices and he admits this has led to the misconception that Café Français is a fine dining restaurant, when that's not the case at all. With its interconnected bar and restaurant, the ambience of the place has been designed to evoke a casual bistro, where people of all ages and from all walks of life can mingle.

The other challenge have been misconceptions about French food, associating it with exotic snail dishes alone, for example. Explaining what defines French cuisine, Jean-Charles says it is the art of preparation and presentation: this means sourcing the right spices such as *piment d'Espelette*, or the Espelette pepper. Citing the pasta dish cannelloni as an example, he explains that while in Sri Lanka the name resonates with Italian cuisine, it is in fact the style of preparation that dictates whether it is a French or Italian dish.

On feedback, he explains that Europeans and Sri Lankans who have travelled and tasted French cuisine in Paris, London, Bangkok, Thailand or Singapore, have only positive things to say. As people continue to be exposed to French cuisine, he believes their appreciation will increase.

Café Français is located on Park Street, a cobbled lane flanked by restaurants that is a blaze of activity at night. Jean-Charles picked it because he saw the potential for the street to become a 'restaurant district' where tourists and residents can enjoy a delicious meal and unwind.

"When people arrive on holiday to Sri Lanka and ask for recommendations I don't want them to be told to go to Café Français. I want them to be told to go to Park Street because there are a lot of places to choose from."

He is glad to have found colleagues with similar attitudes, neighbours who do not engage in petty competition but understand that the success of the street will reward them with abundant trade. Jean-Charles adds that they eagerly await the opening of a new Japanese restaurant on Park Street, and even hosted a week of celebrations during Colombo Fashion Week in February.

The success story of this French bistro draws on something else too - the increased attraction of French investment towards Sri Lanka. The volatility in France, both economically and socially, and the strengthening of the Sri Lankan economy are contributing factors. It is a storyline that has caught the attention of French television, which will be here soon to capture the entrepreneurial journeys of French nationals in Sri Lanka - a documentary Café Français will feature in.

Jean-Charles says that this year alone Sri Lanka has been named the number one destination for French nationals while the Island is amongst the top three places to invest, along with Cuba and Vietnam. According to him, Sri Lanka is especially popular due to its strategic location, being just a few hours away from destinations such as Singapore and Thailand.

While the retail and coconut industries attract the most investment, hospitality is starting to lay claim to a sizeable share. Jean-Charles himself plans on expanding his horizons in the country by opening a boutique hotel in the future. He concludes, "I am not an expatriate: you can't see it, but I am Sri Lankan. I sold everything in France and Sri Lanka is now everything I have. In the morning when I wake up I am happy to know that I have 33 staff; they are my family." And so Jean-Charles has happily made Sri Lanka his home, introducing western flavours to this ancient land.

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