Hilton Afresh With Chef Kazi Hassan

Posted on



Chef Kazi Hassan, Executive Chef at Hilton Colombo

Hilton Colombo, a striking tower in the city skyline is redefining its identity. The dishes are being reimagined and spaces recreated by the new Executive Chef, who brings with him an international angle and youthful flare.

Words Keshini de Silva | **Photographs** Menaka Aravinda

The finishing touches were still being added to the interior of the Hilton Colombo

Lobby. The kitchen was sparkling with a sense of newness and in anticipation of state-of-the-art culinary devices. Spices Restaurant was unrecognisable; its uniquely designed interior echoed modern sophistication and comfort. Although the finer details are still being added and delicious aromas must perfume the interior, it creates a splendid impression.

We met Hilton's new Executive Chef Kazi Hassan, the heart behind the hotel's new menus yet to be unveiled. In fact he was just signing off on a new recipe as we sat down.

A chef with a passion inspired by a lifetime of enjoying Australia's plentiful produce and flavours, Kazi's culinary experience is vast and varied. He has worked for star class restaurants under lauded Chefs. His time with Chef Jean-Georges Vongerichten, managing his Market Restaurant in Doha was particularly pivotal. The most recent stint was as Executive Sous Chef at Hilton Kuala Lumpur.

"Working for Chef Jean-Georges actually gave me a twist in my style. He completely influenced my à la carte cuisine inspiring me to take it to a different dimension," says Chef Kazi. Very precise attention to detail in quantity and quality takes prominence in all his recipes as a result of this training. He was even a part of the Jean-Georges team that took Market to the W Hotel in Doha. Today, he draws from the lessons learnt during this endeavour in his careful curation of Hilton's future fare.

Yet who is Chef Kazi? "I am a melting pot of cuisine", he says after pondering for a moment, a reflection of an upbringing in the diverse city of Melbourne. Trained in the French method, where modern cuisine finds its origins, Kazi has throughout a career spanning 17 years catered to the palates of many, both in large and small audiences.

> "Sri Lankan cuisine is original, very fresh and tasty, all served in an earthy clay pot. You could never go wrong with that. For me it's about how I can maintain this originality and freshness while giving it a modern twist."

Chef Kazi's understanding of the current generation's recreational needs is a critical part of the hotel's gastronomic facelift. "Today you don't want to dine in the refined atmosphere of a Michelin restaurant everyday. Guests want to eat five-star quality

food in a relaxed convivial setting where you can chill out, socialise and be who you are. Of course the dishes have to be visually appealing or Instagram-worthy!" he remarked on the crux of the renovation.

He believes in fusion cuisine, so far as it's not confusion. While he does seek adventure in his dishes, to the Chef, patrons who order a Club Sandwich or Greek Salad must savour the classic flavour celebrated globally. "I cannot serve a Club Sandwich with Seeni Sambol or a spicy Greek Salad, but I can, still, create a separate version with Sri Lankan sauces, condiments and spreads," he explained.

There's no doubt that Sri Lankan dishes have a vast flavour profile, maybe a little heavy on the chili. Although Chef Kazi is eager to play around with these zests and tangs, he is determined to serve the authentic Sri Lankan flavours, as they should be.

"Sri Lankan cuisine is original, very fresh and tasty, all served in an earthy clay pot. You could never go wrong with that. For me it's about how I can maintain this originality and freshness while giving it a modern twist. That's where the chef's creativity can come in." In the midst of that thought, as an example, he even concocted for me a new recipe, of poaching a Sri Lankan crab, tossing it with original Italian Arborio rice and local herbs and topping it off with a garnish of grated coconut and serving with a shellfish bisque. The very thought of that exotic, inspired dish would tingle ones tongue.

Authenticity and creativity go hand in hand in the Hilton menu. Keeping with the latest culinary trends, the Australian Chef also has plans to introduce a range of designer desserts to the Hilton Colombo dessert à la carte menu. He's got an experienced set of hands on deck to assist with creating modern and original delicacies. Chef Kazi is also working closely with his Italian, Chinese, Japanese, Indian, Thai and Sri Lankan Chefs to ensure the kitchens are ready to replicate original flavours and yet have the creative space to add a touch of innovation to the menu.

With much to be accomplished before the restaurants re-open their doors to patrons, it is the team in the kitchen that drives and motivates Kazi. "It's not my show or their show; it's our show. That's my motivation and so far it is going very good."

Chef Kazi wants the very aroma of the hotel's cuisine to create the "Guess what I

ate factor” that is the key draw for modern tourists. Bubbling with innovative flavours, new talent and a fresh look, indeed Hilton Colombo is gearing to provide an experience to write home about.