Mlesna Fortress Tea Centre Continuing a Tradition

Posted on
The magnificent view of the Mlesna Tea Fortress

Situated on the road to Kandy in Kiribathkumbura between Pilimathalawa and Peradeniya, the Tea Fortress is a citadel for the finest varieties of Mlesna tea. Resembling a well-fortified fortress, the setting and atmosphere once inside is nothing but warm and friendly.

Words Jennifer Paldano Goonewardena **Photographs** Damith Wickramasinghe

Sri Lanka is a land of history. The past is a wealth of narratives of gallantry and victory over the impossible. Ceylon Tea is a different kind of a story. It is also a story with a history that is recognised with passion, determination and hard work. It has become a chronicle with many exciting narratives of connoisseurs who took Ceylon Tea to unbelievable levels of recognition. The English, who introduced and taught us the art of drinking tea, became the champions of colonial Sri Lanka’s tea industry. Many were the names of Englishmen that became synonymous with Ceylon Tea. The trademark ‘Ceylon Tea’ would have become history if not for a few Sri Lankans

who passionately rejuvenated the brand to make it the single finest tea in the world.

Anselm Perera belongs to the recent history of Ceylon Tea. The founder of the popular brand Mlesna, today his name is synonymous with tea in Sri Lanka. He is a connoisseur in his trade. His confidence exudes his professionalism and expertise. For Anselm Perera talking about his brand is talking about tea; tea not just as a beverage, but more as a wonder drink.

The Mlesna brand of tea was established in 1983 mainly for the export market. It was then an unknown name among many reputable international brands. Its first local outlet selling packaged tea was established in 1985, which gradually expanded throughout the country, attracting large numbers of tourists and locals alike. The first tea sales outlet serving tea established in Liberty Plaza turned out to be a success, and so was born many new such outlets, including the impressive Mlesna Tea Fortress along the road to Kandy.

It was a decade ago that the idea to establish a new tea centre on the way to Kandy was conceived. The Mlesna Tea Fortress stands out for achieving its objectives in design and character. The design of the exterior of the building with large stone walls, akin to a Dutch fortress, is juxtaposed with the beautiful moonstones at the two entrances, representative of Sri Lanka’s ancient history and heritage. A giant replica of a boiler used in good-old Sri Lankan tea kiosks stands amidst palm trees and beautiful ponds. The garden is immaculately maintained with ample foliage.

The Mlesna Tea Fortress, while exhibiting fine architectural brilliance, has been designed to tell a story. The interior of this tea house is unique because it is the only tea centre established by Mlesna with a restaurant and jewellery store. Hewn out of a rock that had been buried under soil, the building beautifully blends with the natural setting of the rock to expose a great deal of light and fluidity. The tea store and jewellery store are situated on the ground floor. The sitting area on the ground floor is open to the sky and is flanked by the natural rock accompanied by the sound of cascading water. All visitors who stop to buy tea at this Mlesna tea centre can relax over a flavourful cup prepared and served by stewardesses trained in making a fine cup of Ceylon Tea.

Many are the paraphernalia demonstrative of Ceylon’s tea story. Two boilers made of copper and brass stand in two corners. The wall along the steps leading to the restaurant on the first floor is adorned with black and white photographs of the first tea estate in Demodara and workers engaged in different processes of tea

production. An old scale used to weigh tea leaves in a Sri Lankan estate is displayed on the first floor.

The restaurant on the first floor can accommodate 60 guests. The setting of the restaurant is against a backdrop of tea and its many associations with life in Sri Lanka. The restaurant provides a view of the ground floor and the arrangement of tables is enhanced by wooden screens with paintings of Ceylon in the 1920s; a picture of a Village Headman starting his day with a cup of tea; tea time in the Queen’s House in the colonial era; tea promotions on two wheels and life in the tea plantations.

The menu is as attractive as the setting. The restaurant serves Continental, English and traditional Sri Lankan breakfasts. There is also a snack menu. The a la carte menu has an array of soups, salads, spaghetti and grilled meats served with vegetables. Visitors can also choose from the Eastern and Western set-menus. The tea menu is refreshingly creative and features a popular tea shake that is served with a scoop of ice cream. The restaurant floor leads to an elevated garden with a view of the road in front and land with tea plants behind the tea centre.

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Back on the ground floor, the elegant jewellery store has a wide variety of jewellery made of precious and semi-precious stones, set in silver, white-gold and gold. Visitors can place orders for exclusive designs, which will be made by in-house craftsmen. The tea shop meanwhile is the most frequented place, with visitors from all walks of life. It has tea for everyone in many flavours, shapes, and packages.

From the simple wooden box, the dainty cloth pack, the useful caddie tin to fine porcelain plated in gold and platinum, Ceylon Tea is sold in a blend of medium and strong and flavoured with cinnamon, mint, sour-sop and many other natural essences.

The Tea Fortress experience is a demonstration of Anselm Perera’s passion for everything associated with tea. Making a good cup of tea is an art; an art that requires skill. And for someone who has a passion for tea, just any cup of tea would not suffice. To many, tea making is often a concoction of a hurried and clumsy

exercise that lacks the real flavour and aroma of tea.

However, Anselm Perera believes that this golden beverage cannot be a mere drink that quenches the habitual thirst for tea; it has to embody its unique quality of uplifting the human mind and body. Thus, the alchemy of water and tea leaves has to be meticulous to make the perfect cup of tea.

“Tea grown in each different tea producing region in Sri Lanka has a distinct taste, quality and appearance. While Sri Lankans in general enjoy drinking strong tea with milk and sugar, the English opt for strong tea with only milk. Most Europeans, like the Japanese, prefer light tea, while Middle Easterners enjoy the pungent taste of the Ruhunu and Sabaragamuwa tea,” says Anselm Perera.

He explains that water at the correct temperature, adequate time for brewing and the right amount of tea is essential to experience the real taste of Pure Ceylon Tea.

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