The one and only Upali’s for a true taste of Sri Lanka

Posted on



The façade of Upali’s

The food trolley rolls up beside tables of anticipation. Warm servings of rice, steaming scoops of gravy and generous dollops of spicy curries emerge from containers. Large earthenware pots emanate the aroma of authentic flavour… It’s time for a hearty Sri Lankan meal at Upali’s.

Words Prasadini Nanayakkara **Photographs** Indika De Silva

Upali’s by Nawaloka the namesake of its owner, Upali Dharmadasa the business magnate of Nawaloka Group of Companies, is a pleasant departure from the many business ventures associated with the conglomerate. What was once the home of late Deshamanya H K Dharmadasa, Founder of the Nawaloka Group, Upali’s makes a landmark statement overlooking the busy streets at Cinnamon Gardens.

Having always nurtured a flair and passion for cooking Upali Dharmadasa had long held a desire to open a restaurant. And the ancestral home where they all grew up— he the youngest sibling—served as the ideal setting with its light, familiar character.

Upon entering, the main restaurant on the ground floor at once conveys the

ambience of ease and simplicity. That this is very much a family affair is impressed by portraits of H K Dharmadasa and his wife that adorn the front reception.

Customers trickle in as lunchtime approaches to indulge in and converse over a quiet meal. “Our aim is to serve authentic Sri Lankan cuisine which we felt was lacking and at Upali’s we want to offer a Sri Lankan food experience,” states Mahesh Dharmadasa, Director of Nawaloka. Indeed Upali’s sets itself a part as the only restaurant in Colombo, outside of what one might encounter in star class hotels, that serves purely Sri Lankan food.

A quick turn around the restaurant will convey every indication of this intent. Flanking the reception counter sits ‘The Grinding Stone’ and ‘The Mortar’ that were used many decades ago in the Dharmadasa household. At the farther end is an olden day record player and SW Radio that impart a touch of olden day glory. While a take away counter, serves a buffet lunch deftly being wrapped in warmed banana leaves, at the rear, a tray of freshly baked ‘roast paan’ was being drawn out of a wood-fired oven—something you’d be hard pressed to find in the precincts of Colombo 7. Although patrons filled up the ground floor as lunchtime progressed, the space pleasantly lacked the chaotic bustle and noise of hurried activity that generally accompanies a busy restaurant. Instead meals flowed in, in streamlined fashion from a kitchen that was equally sedate.

More importantly, the menu at Upali’s leaves little to be desired with selections of soups, starters and lunch and dinner options. Dishes named in Sinhala and elaborated in English, offer an extensive choice for diners looking for an authentic Sri Lankan meal.

Although opened recently regular patrons have already found favour with the lunch set menu that includes a choice of two types of rice served with three vegetables, coconut sambol, papadams, dry fish and red chilli and curried gravy for a fulfilling tuck-in session. Other notable dishes include Gamé Batu Moju, a deep-fried eggplant of traditional Sri Lankan preparation and Matara Maalu Ambul Thiyal, a sour and dry fish curry of southern origin. Generous portions of these arrive in earthenware pots and served with typical coconut shell spoons.

> Freshly baked ‘roast paan’ out of a wood-fired oven—something you’d be hard pressed to find in the precincts of Colombo 7

Some of the signature and popular dishes at Upali’s include Maalu Olu Kariya (Fish Head Curry), which is a village-style curry cooked in coconut milk, Mutton Varuwal, and Yapane Kakuluwo Kariya (Jaffna Crab Curry) of Jaffna origin with spices sourced from the region.

For dinner options customers can avail of typical Sri Lankan choices that include hoppers, string hoppers, rotti and kottu rotti. Upali Dharmadasa himself often frequents the restaurant to check on dishes and their authenticity often cooking up a dish himself. It is indeed a family affair as the menu includes his wife Sandhya’s Wiskothu Pudima (Sandhya’s Baked Biscuit Pudding) layered with chocolate sauce and ice cream. And of course a dessert menu would not be complete with local favourites Wattalappan and Kiri pani (Curd and Treacle) included in the menu! A satiating meal can leave you sluggish and if you so desire unwind with your pick from the coffee and tea menu to add a finishing touch to a great meal.

Accommodating approximately 80 diners, the main restaurant fills up past noon. On the upper floor customers can choose from six private dining facilities with seating options ranging from six to 28 and a personal waiter and barman to cater to your needs.

These facilities are ideal for families, close-knit friends and get-togethers for hours of dining and lounging and even enjoying a game of sports screened on a wall-mounted TV accommodated in each room. The upper floor opens out to a patio—an altogether novel option as customers can sit amidst a light and airy atmosphere with a view of the picturesque landmarks of the city.

Beyond its function as a restaurant, Upali’s also offers a function hall situated in the uppermost floor, which can be hired for special occasions such as weddings, cocktail parties and presentations. With a standing capacity of 110 inclusive of a balcony front, convenience of access is made possible with ample parking allocated nearby. In future customer’s can look forward to a coffee shop situated adjacent to the restaurant for quick meals such as string hoppers, rotti and more. Keeping with the authenticity the coffee shop will serve freshly brewed local coffee not excluding cappuccino however to keep coffee lovers spoilt for choice.

No doubt Upali’s takes culinary needs seriously. Whether you desire a hearty Sri Lankan meal with the family, a place to unwind with a drink after work, or grab lunch on the go, Upali’s opens its doors for all.

Upali’s By Nawaloka

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