PARADISE ROAD – THE GALLERY CAFÉ

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Paradise Road The Gallery Café is a landmark that reflects the identity of Sri Lanka.

Paradise Road The Gallery Café completes 25 years this month (November 2023). It’s a celebration of a consistent journey of taste, a culture, of bringing people together, creating moments and occasions with its food and location, a place that reshaped the food landscape of Colombo, transformational in every sense, where passion and abandon dedication have bestowed it an iconic identity. Paradise Road Gallery Café is where art and people meet over rustic ambiance and good food.

Words Jennifer Paldano Goonewardane.
Photography BT Image.

The impressive location

The Gallery Café has many styles. It’s natural. Rough. Aged. There is an earthy feeling about it. Importantly, it reflects two men and their style philosophies, which make the core of it and weaves a story of a coming together of parallel universes. It is a tribute to the memory of architect Geoffrey Bawa, still one of the most celebrated in Sri Lanka, by Shanth Fernando, who leased Bawa’s former office in 1998, spending nine months renovating the structure, which had fallen into neglect since Bawa relocated his office, to restore it in a manner that pleased the man who created it first. Shanth, an aesthete and style connoisseur, describes the restoration and bringing to life The Gallery Café as a labor of love. It was a privilege, as he explains, to accomplish his dream through a much-valued property that celebrates a quarter century of playing host to people who loved good food and blissful surroundings.

It’s a labor of love for many reasons. Shanth had treaded into a field that was the domain of a chosen few in Sri Lanka. The new kid on the block was gaining ground with his heightened style quotient, first through The Paradise Road crafts store that had departed from the standard craft shops, and he was pushing further boundaries with a new project where style and an iconic setting were core. He fought through all that with a headstrong attitude. He broke the monopoly of a few who had created a specific style by interrupting it with his unique taste. As Shanth describes, he brought a different taste, a monochrome one. At twenty-five, he sits at The Gallery Café to boast that he made it into a stepping stone for a Bawa tour. It has become one of the most visited Bawa creations, where people can walk in and feel the space’s ambiance.



The distinctive courtyard and pond reflecting Geoffrey Bawa’s unique style.



Shanth Fernando, Founder of Paradise Road The Gallery Café.

Speaking of the space, the snug interior's signature look is one of being undone, roughened up a bit by the elements, the exposed and faded walls, tactile exhibition of moss on the walls and gigantic pots, bulging and clambering roots, even the wood rot, that Shanth deliberately cultivates to embody its creator, to bring out the warmth that gives a feeling of being welcome, reasons for people to return along with the consistent food palette. Consistency in food is based on the logic that people would return to eat the same food if they liked it in the first place, and that logic, of course, is Shanth's alone, and he certainly stands by it firmly.

The Gallery Café was also created as a platform for up-and-coming artists to showcase their paintings. Many renowned artists in Sri Lanka and abroad who were handpicked by Shanth got their break from here. They include Belgian-born artist Saskia Pintelon, based in Sri Lanka, and leading local artists like Jagath Ravindra, Jagath Weerasinghe, and Chandragupta Thenuwara. Pakistani artist Ali Kazim's world's first solo exhibition was held at The Gallery Café when he, as a budding artist, was chosen by Shanth when he had met him in Colombo, attending a SAARC exhibition. Today, he shows his work in key art galleries and museums worldwide.

The details

It’s about taste, and Shanth Fernando’s taste permeates the interior. He follows the dictum of architect Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, who famously said, “God is in the details”, who followed a less is more aesthetic, which Shanth adopts by bringing together Bawa’s enduring expression with his serenely powerful interior design. There are demure vases of white flowers, antiques, and sparse lighting from black metal lampshades and chandeliers, and sling leather armchairs and wrought iron chairs at tables adorned with black and white tablecloths and runners, surrounded by Dutch-period giant pots. The only deviations to a monochromic setting come from the trees and an artist’s paintings on display. The Gallery Café is cocooned into a space surrounded by towering structures, the definition of a haven and an oasis abounding with tranquility and austerity that starts at the entrance. The tilting trees are preserved with supports, and the cobbled front yard and the colonnade lead through the front door to a courtyard supported by wooden pillars with a central pond. The parallel paths lead to the café and the outdoor pavilion. Bawa’s cement table is a remnant from the design genius’s days working from there, still on display and functioning. Opposite is the bar, the same size as the table. Yet, they exude a delicate fusion of the old and the new, as desired by Shanth, who recalls Bawa’s approval of the transformation. He remembers the tears he shed as his health failed, witnessing his creation and a cherished one at that, his precious space, part of his life and work, where ideas were germinated and where he created some of the most iconic buildings transformed masterfully, retaining his stamp and in a manner that pays homage to his memory and talent as an architect. The Gallery Café’s private dining room and open-air pavilion are ideal venues, with their warm and welcoming atmosphere, for celebrations big and small, intimate to grand gatherings of family and friends rolled out in a stylish and relaxed setting.

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Paradise Road’s signature style – minimalist and tasteful.



The open courtyard provides a unique tropical elegance.



The interior subtly features monochrome patterns amidst objects d’art.



Each item is handpicked with design and style in mind.



It is the first space to have both a restaurant and art gallery.



Paradise Road The Gallery Café fosters a timeless and chic ambience.

A journey of vibrant aromas

The cuisine is a mashup that caters to a diverse palate. The cafe’s menu serves international, European, British, and Sri Lankan and has drawn patrons from all over the world, from royalty to celebrities, all patronizing The Gallery Café for a reason. A professed foodie, Shanth claims he serves what he loves and has prepared the menu with passion, nourishing and comforting, a diverse platter supervised by an executive chef of twenty-four years.

So, what’s on the menu? Their fries must be unique because they are hand-cut. The Sri Lankan Fish Head Soup, curried seer fish head in tomato-based soup, is what one calls truly Sri Lankan, which any native would endorse. The eclectic menu is infused with unique East and West flavors, wowing taste buds. Expect lemongrass and ginger chicken with potato and spinach mash, bacon cream cheese filled chicken breast, a dipping of garlic toast in Centella and coconut cream soup, Mediterranean sizzling beef fillet, Rack of Lamb with crushed baby potatoes and

salsa verde, grilled lamb cutlets, pan-fried calves liver, curried coconut crusted modha and tuna stacks on chargrilled aubergine, tomato, basil, mozzarella and salsa verde. From spaghetti with black olives and feta, spinach crepes, and chili-salt crumbed tofu to champagne risotto with broccoli and mushrooms, there are plenty of options for vegetarian eaters on the menu. Shanth was the first restaurateur in Colombo to introduce the Sri Lankan Black Pork Curry, his recipe, into an international menu. As intuition would prove him right, the black pork curry is one of their best sellers. Their dessert range is deeply personal, created by his wife Angelika, like the Chocolate Nemesis, some others an ode to local concoctions like the Traditional Bread Pudding and the Old Fashioned Trifle. When someone wants to take it to New York, there must be something doubly good about the Double Chocolate Cheesecake. There is more than a lashing of sweetness in the Paradise Road Chocolate Cake served with homemade vanilla bean ice cream. No avid gourmand would resist the unique Lemon Meringue Pie, the Pineapple Mango Sorbet with passionfruit ice cream, or the signature Paradise Road Banana Split served with homemade jaggery and coconut ice cream.

Secret to success

My intuition has never lied to me, says Shanth, who attributes his success to hard work, dedication, passion, focus, and divine providence. Ambition and the ambition for success have driven him. Every individual has opportunities, reflects Shanth, and when it knocked on his door, he answered, The Gallery Café being proof of his resolve and optimism. He has always had his head above the water through trying times by cutting his coat according to the cloth. Honesty is at the core of his life, as a human being and as a businessman, and The Gallery Café embraces that in all its fullness by serving food made from authentic ingredients, prepared carefully to give value for money, quality, and consistency.

As he celebrates a milestone with The Gallery Cafe, Shanth holds onto the core values that guided his career. He is still driven by the desire to succeed above making money. Money follows success, says he. Shanth Fernando is a testament to that code.



Black Pork Curry, a signature dish.



Flavorsome Nasi Goreng with chicken and prawn.



A sweet delight, the Chocolate Nemesis.