



Sponge Tandoori Chicken Sandwich

Luscious cakes that are a treat to the eye as well as the palate, melt-in-your-mouth pastries and pies, desserts that tantalise your taste buds and delicious lunches of rice and noodles are among the array of delicacies that greet you as you enter the Sponge Pastry Shop. With its engagingly cozy lounge area and bright, friendly ambience, the shop invites you to step in, relax and treat yourself to its tempting wares.

Words Ayesha Inoon

I have a passion to do things right," says chef Akantha Pandithasekera, Founder and Managing Director of Sponge as he reflects on his extraordinary culinary journey, "I enjoy receiving feedback and I walk into my restaurant with my head held high because of the hard work we do and our commitment to quality."

Having joined the hotel industry as a trainee 37 years ago, Akantha began at the very bottom, always enjoying everything he put his hand to - a fact he counts among one of the secrets of his success. He eventually became the first Sri Lankan Pastry Chef at the Ceylon Intercontinental, taking over from a line of European Chefs. These Chefs were also his mentors, inspiring him to begin his own cake-making business. "We began in one of the extra rooms in our home," he says, "with a small board outside saying 'Akantha's Pastry

Shop.” His wife, Aloma, who is on par with the finest pastry chefs in the country, played a vital role, and their two sons, who were young children at the time, would also often join their parents in the kitchen as they tried and tested new recipes that resulted in the signature Sponge cakes that are so popular among its customers.

As the business grew, Sponge moved into a garage in Colombo 3 and eventually into the large building on Galle Road that they have been occupying for over two decades. With his philosophy that it is a happy member of staff who will produce happy customers, Akantha takes a special interest in the needs of his team, looking into their personal welfare and conducting regular in-house training sessions that motivate and instruct them. He is also committed to using the highest quality ingredients, often from abroad, in the many delicacies that they serve.

“I always tell my staff that this business really belongs to the customers, so we have to give them what they want,” he says, recounting some of the most popular items at Sponge - the scrumptious Chocolate Mousse Cake, Fudge and Nut Cake, Caramel Cake, Praline Cake and Passion Mousse Cake as well as the delicious Lamprais, the quantity of which they pride themselves on, being larger than the average portion. Their diverse menu includes a range of snacks such as Rolls, Buns, Patties, Samosas and Pastries as well as Doughnuts, Éclairs and Cupcakes. Sponge also undertakes catering for outside events, their professional staff often earning many compliments not only on the quality of the food but also on their friendly, efficient service.

As they celebrate 27 years of serving appetizing food to their customers, Akantha has many exciting goals on the horizon for Sponge, such as a Breakfast Menu with Sri Lankan and Western dishes that will be presented through a drive-through concept, where customers can pick up their orders within a few minutes on a busy morning. He also plans to expand the lounge area into a dinner restaurant, hoping to give this over to his younger son Dilshan to design and run.

“Once a chef, always a chef,” he says with a smile, “the kitchen is where my heart is.”

Sponge is very much a family business, with Akantha and Aloma conferring on every dish they create and both their sons also following their parents’ footsteps with their elder son Asanka now lecturing on patisserie in Australia, and Dilshan, a professional photographer specialising in food, handling the majority of the marketing side of the business. Akantha hopes that one day both sons will take over the running of the business entirely, enabling him to return to the kitchen. “Once a chef, always a chef,” he says with a smile, “the kitchen is where my heart is.”

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