

The icing on the cake



Chef Sadun with the gingerbread house created for Christmas (Photo: Vishwathan Tharmagulasingham)

Amidst the seductive aromas of the chocolate room at the Hilton Colombo, pastry chef in the making Sadun Sameera adds the final touches to a freshly baked cake. The piping bag moves deftly in the young man's hands, his concentration absolute. Though chance has robbed him of the ability to hear and speak, Sadun has been blessed with an artist's touch when it comes to creating gastronomic beauties.

Words Keshini de Silva | **Sign language interpreter** Rajith Madushanka



Sadun works on a centerpiece

It's rare to find a cake at the Fine Things delicatessen and bakery at the Hilton Colombo that hasn't been iced by Sadun Sameera. A true perfectionist, he does not shy away from sharing tips on design technique with his peers. Winning first place for his vegetable carvings at an interschool culinary competition was the turning point for Sadun - the moment he became aware of his talent for the first time. He went on to secure a six-month training position in the kitchen at the Hilton, starting with smaller tasks like chopping and carving vegetables and moving on to ice sculpting.

Since 2011 Sadun has been back at the Hilton, this time in the dessert section, where today he works his magic with icing and colour. It was difficult at first, he tells me via a sign language interpreter, because he had no experience with cakes and desserts. But he quietly watched the experienced chefs in action before learning to bend the icing knives and piping bags to his will.

Looking back, he describes the initial challenge of trying to understand the terms and techniques of the industry, and communicate with his peers. It's a challenge that Sadun and the team have evidently overcome, finding simple signs to express what they need to say. Sadun has been eagerly teaching them sign language, in

fact, going as far as to gift them with books to scaffold their learning.

Sadun overcame the initial challenge of trying to understand the terms and techniques of the industry, and communicate with his peers

During his first six months at Hilton, says the young chef, he was given a well-rounded training that exposed him to all fields of cuisine and challenged him in many ways. He was also able to learn about western cuisine and cooking techniques, knowledge he sees as invaluable for his professional journey. Some motivational advice shared by one of Sadun's interviewers, former Hilton general manager Jerome Auvity, has been a big driver for him. The key, Jerome told him, is patience and perseverance. When I ask about who has supported him in achieving his dreams, Sadun doesn't hesitate for a moment: the principal at the Ceylon School for the Deaf and Blind, his home economics teacher, and everyone at the school, from teachers to friends, uplifted his morale and empowered him to face the world. He added that he was humbled by the overwhelming support he has received from his colleagues, including former Hilton executive chef Rohan Fernandopulle and Gigi De Silva, marketing communications manager.

Sadun is passionate about his craft and has an insatiable appetite to hone his skills. Many of the cakes on display at Fine Things are his creations, while he also handles most of the custom projects for clients. Once a customer describes what they want Sadun sets to work researching the options, before presenting his designs for approval. He showed me a printout of the latest cake idea for a client, a cute couple on a bicycle. He enjoys working on comical or cute birthday cakes for children and is keen to craft wedding cakes too. Having been taken under the wing of Hilton pastry chef Stanley Perera, Sadun is encouraged to innovate and even taken on clients who specifically seek out Perera.

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Earlier, Sadun had been working alongside his team to finish up the cakes for daily display. He eagerly shows me his creations, including a series of monkeys sculpted out of icing for a birthday cake. Though only at the work-in-progress stage, it's clearly going to be very impressive indeed. The delightful gingerbread

house he designed for the festive season, meanwhile, has just been taken down and is sitting on the table before us.

Crafting these cakes, Sadun explains, is his passion. Regarding his future plans, he says that his only desire is to perfect his skills, learn new techniques, and innovate. It's a focus that hints at a promising future for the young chef.

Hailing from Anuradhapura, Sadun comes from a tight - knit family, just him, his mother and father - a slipper maker and farmer, respectively - and a younger brother. The three of them form the cheerleading squad that supports Sadun in all his ventures, eagerly awaiting news about his next challenge. Working in Colombo and following his dreams means that Sadun spends a considerable amount of time away from home, commuting from his aunt's house in Beruwela. But it's a sacrifice that he's willing to make. Clearly finding a second family in the team at Hilton makes the challenge much easier.

That Sadun finds great joy and inspiration in his work is evident. He has a further motivation though too: setting an example that will inspire others to look beyond their restrictions and focus on their capabilities and strengths.

