Very Beautiful

Posted on

The Gallery Café – An Enduring Expression of Taste

Paradise Road – The Gallery Café reflects Shanth Fernando’s distinctive personal aesthetic. Guided by an instinctive creative process, it has retained its timeless appeal and identity over 28 years.

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The Gallery Café’s charming entrance, framed by frangipani trees and Geoffrey Bawa’s timeless architecture.

Walking into The Gallery Café from the busy streets of Colombo is to step into the artistic world of Shanth Fernando. While the restaurant's rustic, timeworn character is among its most endearing features, enhanced by the fact that the building was once Geoffrey Bawa's office, its present-day aesthetic is very much Fernando's own creation. Old lamps, earthen pots, wooden benches and stone flooring lend the setting an understated charm. The trees are equally captivating. Frangipani trees, with their distinctive slanting branches and graceful twists, enhance the natural beauty of the surroundings.

At the heart of the entrance is the signature courtyard, with a pond framed by twelve columns that line the pathway on either side. It is a quintessential Geoffrey Bawa composition, reflecting his characteristic appreciation of open spaces and architectural simplicity. This tranquil approach leads into a lively restaurant, filled with conversation and music.

Attentive stewards welcome diners as they enter a restaurant that has earned international recognition and been widely written about. For Fernando, running The Gallery Café has been a labor of love – an opportunity that came his way in life, and one he believes was bestowed through divine providence.



Shanth Fernando, the visionary behind The Gallery Café, shares Geoffrey Bawa’s appreciation
of good taste.

Fernando shares Geoffrey Bawa’s appreciation of good taste. Yet, he makes a distinction between style and taste. While style, he believes, can be learned or acquired, taste is something altogether different. “Taste is something you believe in wholeheartedly, and it has got nothing to do with money,” he says. The Gallery Café is, in many ways, a testament to this philosophy. Its collection of antiques and artifacts, bearing the patina of age, creates an authentic, almost archaic charm. Nothing is overly elaborate or ostentatious, yet every detail makes its presence felt. It is this considered restraint, combined with Fernando’s instinctive eye, that gives The Gallery Café its distinctive character.

Whenever Shanth Fernando speaks about The Gallery Café, his pride and affection for the place are unmistakable. He reflects on how life presents people with opportunities, which he regards as gifts from God, and believes it is up to each individual to recognize, embrace, and nurture them. As a Geoffrey Bawa creation, the property was coveted by many, but Fernando ultimately received Bawa’s approval.



Signature courtyard, a quintessential Geoffrey Bawa composition.

For Fernando, acquiring the property was the fulfillment of a long-held desire. He describes it as his favorite property in Colombo, one he would drive past every day, imagining what it would be like to live there. As he recalls, “I used to come and fantasize about living here.”

However, when Fernando approached Bawa, the architect reportedly remarked, “Oh, not another Paradise Lost.” Nevertheless, he eventually entrusted the property to Fernando. Today, The Gallery Café has become the most recognized of all Bawa properties, largely because its original character and aesthetic have been so carefully preserved. From the walls to the décor, he has sought to retain the atmosphere that Bawa created, while allowing the property to evolve. As Fernando observes, there is an inherent warmth in Bawa’s architecture; it is never cold.

“Everything I have done here over the years has been a tribute to Bawa. I take his taste and enhance it,” he says.

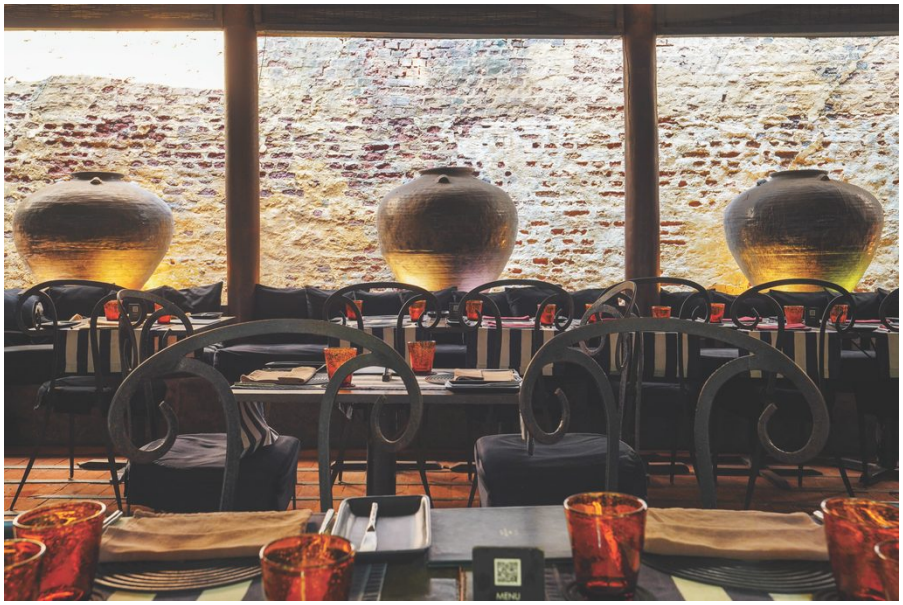
At the rear of the property, a collection of life-sized pots catches the eye, particularly one of immense proportions. Commissioned by Fernando as a special tribute to Bawa, the oversized pot serves as the focal point of the space. Fernando seems to have an instinctive understanding of the Bawa aesthetic, almost as though it were embedded in his own creative sensibility. There is an evident kinship in their approach to creativity, giving Fernando the confidence that his stewardship of the property has done justice to Bawa’s legacy.



An inviting display of delectable desserts complements the artistic ambiance.



First impressions set the tone, where thoughtfully arranged furnishings create an atmosphere of understated charm.



Elegant dining space, where oversized earthen pots and rustic textures create a distinctive ambiance.



Small details lend the garden its unforgettable charm – a scrap metal sculpture, warm wall lamps, and the stillness of evening.



Chicken Congee with Crispy Fried Garlic, Scallions, Dried Shrimp Relish, and Boiled Egg.



Spicy Seafood Laksa with Shoe Lobster.



Spicy Seafood Laksa with Shoe Lobster.



Rack of Lamb with Crushed Baby Potatoes and Salsa Verde.

When Fernando first leased the property, his intention was to establish an art gallery with an adjoining café. He recognized, however, that an art gallery alone would not be commercially viable. The concept gradually evolved into a restaurant with an attached art gallery. The Gallery Café found its identity almost organically, bringing together Fernando’s appreciation of food, art, and ambiance. The quality of the dining experience, the distinctive atmosphere and, not least, the association with a Geoffrey Bawa building all contributed to its emergence as a destination in its own right.

Fernando is confident that it has earned its place as an established Colombo landmark. Yet perhaps its greatest appeal lies in the fact that it has never deliberately set out to become one. Instead, it has evolved organically, guided by Fernando’s clear vision and unwavering belief in his work.

“We only compete with ourselves. We are inspired by ourselves and by what we do.

It’s not being cocky. It’s being religious and faithful to what we believe in,” he says.

Eighty per cent of the menu at The Gallery Café remains unchanged from the one introduced 28 years ago. The restaurant is also renowned for its extensive dessert selection, so much so that diners often visit after eating elsewhere, simply to enjoy its desserts. The original creations were developed by Fernando’s wife, Angelika, who passed away five years ago, but the quality, variety, and character of the offerings have remained consistent. Fernando has never compromised on ingredients, always opting for the best available. This commitment to quality and consistency has been central to the restaurant’s longevity and popularity. Much of its reputation has also been built through word of mouth rather than conventional advertising.



Signature Jaggery Sundae, topped with
delicate strands of Bombai Muttai.

“We don’t change our menu for a reason. I travel the world and go to restaurants in Paris, Milan, and other places to eat what I had before. So, when people come here, they know from the moment they walk through the door what they are going to eat, whether it is pork curry, lemongrass and ginger chicken, which is a signature dish, or coq au vin. These are all classic dishes. Other restaurants may open, but they cannot compete with us if the flavor isn’t there. My chef has been with me for 29 years, so the proof is in the pudding. It is the same with our barman. People come specifically for his cocktails,” Fernando says.

Fernando was among the first to introduce black pork curry to a Western-style restaurant menu, giving it a distinctly Sri Lankan character. The Jaggery Sundae is another of his original creations, topped with Bombai Muttai, Sri Lanka’s version of candy floss, and has become a firm favorite among regulars. For many diners, a visit to The Gallery Café is incomplete without it. The banana split is equally distinctive, combining coconut, jaggery and vanilla ice cream with bananas and fruit cake.



Old Fashioned Trifle – a colorful layered dessert with fruit, cream, and a delicate topping of toasted almonds.



A delicate slice of Dulce De Leche Cheese Cake served with whipped cream and caramel garnish.

The restaurant’s appeal extends beyond its food. Tuesday evenings are dedicated to hoppers, while Fridays bring a livelier atmosphere, with dancing to 1970s music. These familiar offerings have become part of The Gallery Café experience, adding to its continuing appeal.

A good cook himself, Fernando believes that very few people truly understand the taste of food. He attributes his own appreciation and understanding of cuisine, in part, to his marriage to a European, whose culinary traditions he embraced. His wife also played a significant role in developing the desserts that remain a hallmark of The Gallery Café. Fernando explains that the desserts are deliberately different from conventional Sri Lankan offerings, which can often be overly sweet. At The Gallery Café, sweetness is carefully balanced, while Western dishes are prepared using authentic Western ingredients.

“Everybody compliments me for the consistency of the food at The Gallery Café and at all the Paradise Road outlets,” he says.

Another much-anticipated occasion on the restaurant’s calendar is its New Year’s Eve celebration, which attracts patrons from far and wide. However, unlike conventional New Year’s Eve parties, it is not organized around a formal program, ticketed entertainment, special menus, prizes or raffle draws. Instead, the evening unfolds naturally, with music, good food and the familiar ambiance of The Gallery Café. Guests can dress as they please, arrive at any time during the evening, enjoy a meal, dance, and leave whenever they wish. The celebration continues into the early hours of the New Year, with the restaurant welcoming guests until around 3 am. As a thoughtful tradition, milk rice is served, and each guest receives a gift. All that is required is a reservation. With seating for up to 160 people, the New Year’s Eve gathering is simply an extension of the Gallery Café experience, offering an informal and welcoming way to usher in the year.

Behind The Gallery Café’s success is a man who has remained personally involved in every aspect of its operation. Fernando has not only curated the menu and safeguarded its consistency through constant tasting and close supervision of the kitchen, but also makes a point of visiting every table to speak with diners and ensure they are enjoying their experience. His hands-on approach has paid off. Over

the years, the restaurant has built a reputation for consistency, supported by a loyal team whose members have worked alongside him for many years. His continued presence remains an integral part of its enduring success.

Fernando entered the restaurant business at a time when Colombo's dining scene was vastly different from what it is today. Looking back, he attributes much of his success to confidence and the willingness to act on an opportunity. Having lived overseas for 16 years, including a decade in Australia, he returned to Sri Lanka with plans to manage his already established Australian business from Colombo. However, fate had other plans. During his first week back, while driving around the city, he came across a newly constructed retail space on Flower Road. Acting on instinct, he decided to open a shop, despite having no merchandise to sell. That spontaneous decision marked the beginning of Paradise Road. For Fernando, it was confidence that made the difference. He believes that without it, he would not have reached where he is today.

True to his original vision of establishing an art gallery where paintings could be previewed, Fernando has ensured that The Gallery Café continues to provide a platform for artists to exhibit their work. He takes particular pride that many local and international artists have had their first major exposure through the venue. He also believes he was the first to raise the standard of art previews in Sri Lanka by creating an experience where visitors could appreciate paintings while enjoying food and drinks.

Today, while others seek to emulate his concept and compete with him, Fernando remains unfazed. His confidence comes from knowing what he does best and staying true to his priorities: quality, taste, and attention to detail. Over the years, he has established a reputation on his own merit, while providing emerging artists with an important platform from which to launch their careers. His ability to turn his creative instincts into successful ventures might well be described as a Midas touch. Yet, for Fernando, success lies not in some magical formula but in the details – in the taste, the choices, and the difference they create.

"People can't understand how I did what I did. For example, when I decorated this place, I didn't do it on paper. I did it in my head. I would fly to Paris looking for a chandelier, imagine where it would go, and it would work perfectly. Architects and interior designers use modern technology and drawings. It's all in my head."

"The talent that I have is intuitive. My mother recognized my talent and fostered it.

The taste that I had developed was my wealth. I would see only what I want to see. I can go to Holland, I can go to Paris – I can go to a trade fair, and I only see what I want to see. I have confidence in choosing what I do."

We asked Fernando what he thought would please Geoffrey Bawa most if the architect were to walk into The Gallery Café today. His response was immediate: "That I maintained his style. That I've been religious and loyal to his taste."

He recalls a particularly memorable occasion when Bawa visited the property to see its transformation for himself. As Bawa departed, Fernando accompanied him to his car, offered his hand, and thanked him for coming. Bawa looked at him and simply said, "Very beautiful." Fernando was overcome with emotion.

"I ran inside. Because when you take something that belongs to somebody else, and try to accomplish something that he would like or be satisfied with, that's a huge challenge, and I accomplished that. So when he said, 'Very beautiful', I was on cloud nine that day, because those words came from a master."

For Fernando, those two words were perhaps the greatest affirmation he could have received. Over more than two decades, Fernando has not only done justice to a heritage building but has also helped raise the standard of Sri Lanka's dining setting through an unwavering commitment to quality and consistency. At The Gallery Café, the setting and the cuisine complement each other. It is this union of place and food that continues to draw visitors, who come to savor both.

Paradise Road – The Gallery Café

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Open from 10 am to 12 am daily