Eating out in Sri Lanka

10 Feb 2011 by Nick Lander/FT

Sri Lankans smile readily, particularly now that peace has finally descended. But there is one immediate way to make them laugh - just mention the word cricket and the one-day internationals that start in Colombo shortly. Although highly excited at the prospect of seeing their own team in action, most seem to be betting on India, South Africa or England to win.

My first exchange on this subject took place shortly after I had been waiting nervously to cross Sea Street by Colombo harbour. A stranger suddenly stepped out, brought the traffic , mainly thee-wheeled tuk tuks, to a standstill and beckoned us to cross.

While his ulterior motive was to lead us to a gem store, he showed us en route the colourful, if neglected, fish market, four Hindu temples, a Tamil marriage hall whose kitchen was preparing to feed a multitude, and the Dutch Church. We then discussed cricket before he succumbed to my questioning and led us to his favoured restaurant.

131 2nd Cross Street in the bustling Pettah Market is the narrow entrance to **Sriyani**, a Tamil vegetarian restaurant that is almost as busy as the streets outside. A steep narrow staircase at the rear of the building leads to three floors of tables, each with a large basin in which to wash your hands before and after the meal and an extensive, plastic menu on the wall, happily with most sections in English.

Although communication with the waiting staff was not so straightforward, we were eventually served what we thought we had ordered, vegetable thalis comprising ten small bowls of rice, aubergine, jackfruit and numerous other ingredients mopped up by naan bread with bowls of sour banana and a creamy rice dessert. The bill was £8 for four including fresh fruit juices and lassi and an immediate immersion into the distinctively clean flavours of this island's cooking.

Dinner at **Beach Wadiya** south of the capital, which has been serving the freshest fish and seafood for the past 31 years, began most disconcertingly, however.

The three-wheeler tuk tuk (like the red one shown above lurking behind a giant pot belonging to Sun & Sea by the main railway line just south of Bentota, a restaurant where we were served a surprisingly good prawn curry after the owner ran out and persuaded us that the restaurant was in fact open, and clearly hoping for some Russian customers) dropped us by the obligatory security guard, but to reach the entrance to the restaurant one has to cross two lines of railway track that link the capital to Galle in the south. Painted on to the wall just outside the entrance is a giant copy of a cartoon of a singing lobster credited to the *FT*'s eminent artist James Ferguson.

This cartoon is also reproduced by the bar and in the restaurant, while the review it relates to, written in 1994 by Kieran Cooke, is displayed on the wall alongside banks of photos of the many cricketers, politicians and celebrities who have eaten here. When its charismatic owner Olwyn Weerasekera (below, in front of all his photographs of visiting celebrities) heard of my *FT* connection, he asked me to please thank Cooke and Ferguson. 'You've no idea how much business this article has brought me over the years', he added.

Beach Wadiya joins that long list of fish restaurants by the sea that never need to change: feet in the sand; fresh fish, in this case grilled prawns with garlic and devilled crab, enjoyed after red bibs had been tied round our necks, along with the most delicious rice; and a dish of buffalo curd with thick treacle honey are more than enough ingredients for a memorable meal.

But I have never eaten anywhere where metal trays play such an important role. The wine list consists of four bottles of white and rosé straight from the fridge laid out on one tray while another doubles as the menu carrying the raw prawns, crab and seer fish, waiting to be grilled. The only written menu here comes with the coffee.

The **Gallery Café**, located in the former offices of the renowned architect Geoffrey Bawa, are much more stylish, in a manner that would be the envy of any aspiring restaurateur in London or New York. The courtyard entrance with a fishpond casts a sense of calm that is cleverly reproduced in the restaurant, and the design of the tables and crockery,

particularly the black-and-white striped jugs, are a joy.

So too were our cocktails, Indian butter chicken and spicy cubes of tofu with broccoli. But what I will best remember about this meal was my introduction to gotu kola, here blended with coconut milk and served as an almost spiritual soup.

Gotu kola, I was to learn from Premasiri, another cricket-mad waiter, is a green herb that looks like a geranium leaf and grows widely over the island as ground cover. Consumed widely by expectant mothers, it is also widely used in cooking. I was to encounter it next as a very tasty accompaniment to the national dish of curry and rice, where it is diced and mixed with chilis, desiccated coconut and lime juice. It deserves to be as widely exported as the island's Ceylon tea but I fear that its very freshness prevents this.

Nihonbashi, opposite the Galle Face hotel, celebrates another aspect of the island's bounty, its fish.

While the simple wooden fish huts that hug the coast attest to the freshness of its daily catch, Dharshan Munidasa, born to a Japanese mother and Sri Lankan father, crafts them into a sensational Japanese restaurant. The only imported fish he uses is salmon but monthly trips to Tokyo for rice, pots and all the other essential ingredients make his six tables and seven private rooms justifiably sought after.

An exceptional meal included tuna sashimi from an 81-kilo rockeye; a lightly grilled crab claw with soy and olive oil; grilled local shiitake mushrooms with okra; and another memorable soup, this time of dashi, sea bream and chicken. A restaurant to celebrate in - whoever wins the cricket.

Beach Wadiya, 2 Station Avenue, 00 94 2588568

Gallery Café, 2 Alfred House Road, 00 94 2582162

Nihombashi, www.nihombashi.lk

[I should point out that the picture top left of this article was not taken at any of the restaurants described above, but at the Room to Read school we visited where they had very kindly prepared this snack for us of lentil cakes, the delicious local bananas and, of course, tea. I wanted to include it because it is a) colourful and b) sharper than most of my attempts at photography - JR]