



**Sri Lanka: A prize trip of lifetime for Zest Quest Asia Champions
Farnborough College of Technology**



'And the winner of the 2015 Asia Zest Quest young chef competition is Farnborough College of Technology.'

These words seem like a distant memory since three young chefs and their lecturers embarked on a trip to Sri Lanka to claim their prize. Sri Lanka, once known as Ceylon until 1972, welcomed the worthy winners with a respectable 32C and made them comfortable at the Hilton Colombo Hotel. The reception hall was impressive with its large cake and chocolate counter and our rooms on the 16th floor offered breathtaking views over Sri Lanka's capital, Colombo.



After a weekend spent acclimatising to the island we were all greeted by the HR manager and received a very informative introduction to Sri Lanka as well as the Hilton Hotel group. We learned that almost 140 chefs are employed at the hotel which was a huge surprise to us all.



The day continued with a cookery demonstration at one of the hotel's outdoor restaurant kitchens 'Curry Leaf' where we witnessed and experienced local dishes such as 'Kakukuwo' a crab curry, devilled chicken and yellow Suduru Samba rice. The chefs were all very passionate about sharing their local dishes with us and it was clear from the start that the Sri Lankan cuisine is very light, fresh and flavoursome due to the clever use of spices such as cardamoms, cinnamon, drumstick leaves, lemongrass, chilli and many more.



Our culinary journey continued with a visit to the local fish market, an unforgettable experience due to its sheer size and hub of activity. Well before sunrise huge numbers of fish such as sea catfish, tuna, cherry barb, Malabar sprats, green cromide and lipstick goby changed hands very quickly.

The vegetable market in Colombo city centre was equally impressive with its huge piles of fruit, vegetables and spices, the combined smell of which easily overwhelmed our western nostrils.



Roaming the streets of Sri Lanka, we soon came the across the popular local dishes such as 'hoppers' a basket made from a fermented batter made from rice flour and coconut milk filled with eggs or 'Lunu Miris' a mix of red onion and spices. Other popular dishes included 'Pittu' a cylinder of steamed rice mixed with grated coconut and 'Kevum' a sweet rice flour based deep fried oil cake. Back at the hotel we were fortunate enough to learn how to prepare and cook these dishes and impressed with our excitement for the local gastronomy one of the chefs went out to the market to purchase an array of specialised

cooking utensils so that we could make the new dishes back home in England. Armed with a Sri Lankan cookery book and a vast collection of local kitchen gadgets we feel ready to take on the challenge and introduce Sri Lankan foods to our menu at the college. A local Sri Lankan food supplier has already been found back in the UK.

One cannot visit Sri Lanka and not talk about tea but what we were about to experience and learn about Sri Lanka's tea changed our views of tea forever. A three-hour bus journey from Colombo took us to the Rilhena Estate, one of many belonging to the Dilmah dynasty. We learned that tea in its simple form grows in three main regions in Sri Lanka from low grown, mid grown to high grown. The Rilhena estate was constructed in 1914 and is located at an elevation of 153 meters above sea level and is therefore considered as low grown.



The owner, Merrill J. Fernando – a man of extraordinary vision, strength and integrity was finally in a position in 1988 to set up his dream of his own plantation and founded the Dilmah Estate which now consists of over 30 estates across Sri Lanka. He believes in family values a business as a matter of human service and with his knowledge and inspiring passion for tea he is able to produce artisanal handmade traditional tea. After gaining insight into growing, harvesting and processing tea it became very apparent that Merrill J. Fernando's vision was not just about tea but also about supporting the underprivileged and marginalised communities by providing a huge variety of projects such as housing and building communities, mid- day meal programmes, school bags for plantation children, healthcare and medical camps as well as a huge number of small entrepreneurial programmes for his workers. In addition he is providing opportunities for the Differently-abled, women's empowerment as well as conserving nature, natural resources and cultural diversity.

Our tea journey continued with a twelve-course taster menu where we were challenged to sample a selection of foods with different teas. Rather similar to matching food with wine the tea becomes the perfect accompaniment to the dishes. Some of the combinations were beef burgers with Earl Grey tea, pork sausage with Darjeeling, sea bass with green tea, apple pie with camomile and dark chocolate with Ceylon Souchong, a speciality tea smoked with cinnamon bark.

We consider Sri Lanka as a trip of a lifetime and feel immensely privileged that we were able to experience fragments of a truly fascinating country with all its cultural heritage and local gastronomy. We will take many of our newly learned skills back to our own home country of England and are excited to inspire and share our experiences with our communities.

