

The restaurants transforming Sri Lanka into a culinary hotspot

A trio of restaurants on Sri Lanka's south coast is turning local ingredients into world-class cuisine



Ocean Terrace at Cape Weligama offers accomplished and subtle cooking | Image: Tom Parker

WHERE TO FIND

Café Ceylon, Matara Road, Kabalana, Ahangama (+9491-228 2729; cafeceylon.lk). Fortaleza, 9 Church Cross Street, Fort, Galle (+9477-339 3397; fortaleza.lk). Ocean Terrace Restaurant, Cape Weligama, Abimanagama Road, Weligama (+9441-225 3000; resplendentceylon.com).

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Sri Lanka's national dish is modestly called "rice and **curry**" – it is, in fact, a mound of rice flanked by spoonfuls of at least five curries. It is a joy for the eyes as well as the palate: glistening purple aubergines, fragrant with curry and pandan leaves; pineapple flecked with bright-red chilli; and maybe okra, sliced diagonally and tossed in a pan with garlic and red onion. The judicious use of coconut smooths away any rough edges of spice and adds a lustrous texture.

You will find rice and curry at humble roadside shacks and smart **Colombo** restaurants, but there is no finer place to enjoy it than Ocean Terrace at **Cape Weligama**, the opulent restaurant of a luxury resort perched on a promontory 30 minutes east of Galle.

The cooking is accomplished and subtle. Leafy, slightly bitter gotu kola (centella), made mallum-style with coconut, red onion and lime, is as springy as tabbouleh; banana blossoms, tempered with turmeric and curry leaves; sweet-sour devilled prawns from **Koggala Lake**; a rich, dark, seriously spicy goat curry; meaty, tender jackfruit, with cumin and mustard; and a jackfish curry, sour and smoky with gambodge (Malabar tamarind).

There were the classic accompaniments too: lunumiris, a relish made of chillies, dried Maldivian **fish**, lime and red onion; puffy, blistered poppadoms; a fresh lime pickle; and – Sri Lankan cuisine's crowning glory – pol sambol: grated coconut mixed with chilli, red onion, lime and Maldivian fish. Not that the kitchen at Ocean Terrace is hidebound by tradition. Chef Jerome Tissera recently cooked his version of Sri Lankan cuisine at Carousel, on Blandford Street in **London**. I sampled a few of his "works in progress" in Weligama – a show of delightfully intelligent, innovative cooking.

On **Sri Lanka's south coast**, this inventive use of top-notch local ingredients is all the rage. When Fortaleza launched six years ago in newly trendy Galle Fort, it had just five other restaurants for company; now, that number has swelled to around 125. Fortaleza is still one of the best places to escape the heat and the bustle: start with an arrack sour in its handsomely furnished courtyard, then try local tuna fillet, crusted with black sesame, briefly seared, and served with a kick of wasabi. It does terrific fish and chips too.

Don't miss Café Ceylon, either. Between Cape Weligama and Galle, in a lovely garden set back from the Matara Road, chef/proprietor German Dimaano draws on his Chinese and Australian background to interpret local seafood and shellfish with superb results. Perky prawn potsticker dumplings with an umami-rich sauce made from dried shrimp and Maldivian fish, for example; or a whole steamed fish bathed in soy-based stock, smothered with coriander and spring onion; or a gentle, flavoursome, turmeric-rich prawn curry. For **the travelling gourmet**, Sri Lanka's food now shines as brightly as her tropical sun.