

# Condé Nast Traveller

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INDIAN EDITION

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**Q&A** In conversation with

# DHARSHAN MUNIDASA

With two restaurants—Nihonbashi and Ministry of Crab—in San Pellegrino's Asia's 50 Best list, Sri Lanka's top chef explains what makes him tick. By **Govind Dhar**

## How does your heritage play out in your food?

My identity is Sri Lankan even though I am half Japanese. Thankfully, my palate is coded for both cuisines—at Nihonbashi, we do authentic Japanese, and at Kaema Sutra, it's modern Sri Lankan.

## Tell us a bit about how your culinary style and ethos have evolved over the years.

The key to being a good cook is understanding taste. In fact, I approach food from the other side: eating. Then, I've been lucky to develop relationships built on the foundation of food. I'll explain what I mean: over the last 20 years that I've visited the Tsukiji fish market in Tokyo, sea urchin, crab and fish merchants have shared their food with me, so there is a deep personal connection. In Japan, if you really like the food, and you ask them, they'll show you how to do it. By this I don't mean you're going to get it exactly right the first time. It's been a lot of trial and error and I have had time to experiment in my kitchens.

## What's the secret to Japanese cooking?

Dashi! Dashi is the backbone of the cuisine, and comes from making soup stock. There's a huge interpretation divide between Japanese food in and outside Japan. Also, what Japanese people eat at home is very different from what they eat at a restaurant.

## How did Ministry of Crab come about?

I make it a habit to visit fish markets often, even globally. I found good crab here, so that's how I started Ministry of Crab. I thought we would do 30 crabs a day. Today, we're doing over



**Chef Munidasa preparing a dish at Ministry of Crab. Right: a crab curry at the restaurant**

100kg of crab a day. There's no excuse to not have excellent crab in Sri Lanka, when such high-quality stuff gets exported.

## What is your food philosophy?

Keep it simple. We are very ingredients-based; I think knowing your ingredients is essential. At Nihonbashi, we buy the tuna whole and cut it here so my staff knows what salmon and tuna look like. If you have quality ingredients, making good food is not difficult, but making good food with bad ingredients is very hard, which is where technique comes in.

## Share some foodie memories with us.

When I was a kid in Sri Lanka, a lady would come by, selling

crabs door-to-door. My brother and I actually used to play with them! We got pinched from time to time, but it was great fun. And I remember once, in Japan, when I was 12, my grandmother gave me 1,000 yen. I spent it all on live prawns. My family simply didn't understand why. "Don't you get them in Sri Lanka?" they asked, incredulous. I said, "Yes, but we don't get them live to make sashimi." My aunt refused to touch them and screamed when I peeled them; they wrapped themselves around my fingers. I ate all ten. (By the way, I did the same thing two years ago at my aunt's house, but now, no one says anything to me!)

## Since you love to eat, what are your favourite places



**“I remember once, in Japan, when I was 12 years old, my grandmother gave me 1,000 yen. I spent it all on live prawns.”**

## to eat at, both at home and abroad?

Here, in Colombo, we have a large esplanade near the beach, with a number of small eateries that do some absolutely fantastic Sri Lankan street food. In fact, the roast chicken on the street is what inspired me to do one at Kaema Sutra. Then, London Grill and Café Français are good for steaks, and the black pork curry at Gallery Café is unique. Abroad, I like eating at stand-alone places whose names I don't remember—but they're all in Japan. There are ramen joints like Choka Soba Inoue, in Tokyo, and places where I relish the stingray and frog legs. I like Waku Ghin and Iggy's in Singapore. 🍣