



CRABBING ATTENTION IN COLOMBO

Off field, they have forged many match-winning partnerships for Sri Lanka, including a world record in Tests. Now, Sangakkara and Jayawardene are partners in a slightly off-beat endeavour, one with mouth-watering prosectps

BY VIMAL KUMAR

Photograph by LAKRUWAN WANNIARACHCHI/AFP

THE CRAB TROIKA
Jayawardene (far right) and Sangakkara's on-field chemistry and off-field friendship translated into a business partnership thanks to Minidasa (above, centre), their restaurateur friend.

The best Twenty20 teams of the world have converged in Colombo's Taj Samudra Hotel for the ICC World T20. Located in the heart of the Lankan Capital, the five-star hotel, with its multi-cuisine menus, offers everything the most gourmet of cricketers may want. But many foreign players have been seen strolling down a few blocks to pay a visit to the "Ministry of Crab" at the World Trade Centre.

The one player who will not take that walk, perhaps, is Dale Steyn. Why?

Because, even if Steyn loves the seafood that the restaurant is famous for, he probably holds a slight grudge against its even more famous owners.

The long-standing pillars of Lankan cricket, Mahela Jayawardene and Kumar Sangakkara, who are the restaurant's joint partners, were responsible for inflicting the world's highest Test partnership (624 runs) on the Steyn-led South African bowling attack in 2006, also in Colombo.

The day we visited the restaurant, Jayawardene's wife Christina was having dinner with some of her close friends. The captain's wife was playing the perfect host at the Ministry, housed in a 400-year-old and refurbished Dutch Hospital and capable of hosting 90 guests at a time.

Sangakkara and Jayawardene's long-time friend Dharshan Munidasa is the third cog in the venture.

"Both are big fans of my other restaurants in Colombo. After meeting them several times and cooking for them, we became friends," says Munidasa, on the beginning of his friendship with the cricketing duo. "When they are not touring abroad, I meet them almost every week. I am a big fan of their cricket and they love my food. And when I suggested this idea to them they jumped at it."

Cricketers turning restaurateurs is nothing new and some of our own Indian icons, including Sachin Tendulkar and Sourav Ganguly, have gotten involved in the business. Even Zaheer Khan owns a restaurant in Pune.

But India players, with their busy schedules, hardly get the time to add a personal touch to the establishments.

Sangakkara and Jayawardene are slightly different in that sense, for they seem genuinely passionate about the Ministry—their feelings evident when you speak to them.



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For Sangakkara, the restaurant was the fulfillment of a long-cherished dream. He loves to unwind by watching cookery shows on TV and that interest comes through when he talks about the venture.

"It just happened. It was a result of a couple of idle chats with my friends. And it was my friend, Andy Hager, who suggested the name," says a visibly proud Sangakkara. "The rest is history as they say! The ambience is nice and I love the place."

Marketing the new joint was not difficult for the duo either. After all, they are Sri Lankan sporting icons. The Ministry has become one of the hippest places to be in Colombo, a hangout for some of the most famous names in the city. It also attracts cricket fanatics by the hundreds, who turn up hoping to meet and chat with some of the stars who frequent the joint.

Sometimes Sangakkara and Jayawardene entertain the fans and guests, interacting with them and getting feedback on the restaurant.

The restaurant opens for dinner from 6 to 11 p.m., but during the World T20, guests have the luxury of enjoying the "iconic ingredients", that make this place special, at lunch time too.

"We have got iconic ingredients. First is the Sri Lankan lagoon crabs, the second is the Dutch hospital building and third is the cricketers," says Munidasa, the lead chef of the establishment. "One of the unique features which separates us from others is that we only use fresh catch in our dishes and have just one freezer. I won't claim that we are the first non-freezer restaurant in the world. But in this age, a restaurant without a freezer is rare and, I feel, it is a bold statement to make."

Former Sri Lanka cricket coach Geoff Marsh is a big fan of this restaurant. So far during the World T20, players like Aussie Brad Hogg, Bangladeshi players Shakib Al-Hasan, Tamim Iqbal and Pakistani players Mohammad Hafeez and Abdul Razzaq have dined here. Former West Indies captain Richie Richardson was very pleased after his visit. Jayawardene, skipper of the IPL team Delhi Daredevils, invited his teammates Virender Sehwag and Umesh Yadav for dinner in August.

"Anyone is welcome any-



time. It's an interesting venture and we have done ok," says Sangakkara. "I will invite my international mates over here in the coming weeks."

Another charming aspect of the project is that it is not just business for the Lankan cricketers. There is a touch of philanthropy attached to it as well.

"The profit earned by the sale of aprons, which has Mahela and Kumar's imprint, goes to their foundations for charity work," says Munidasa, who believes that the involvement of Sangakkara and Jayawardene in the venture might see the Ministry establish itself as a global chain.

"Many people are asking us to open the restaurant in their country," says Munidasa. "We are getting queries from Hong Kong, Malaysia and Singapore, who are

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Sri Lankan lagoon crabs are one of the biggest draws of the restaurant, which is raring to offer its best during the World T20.



crazy for fine crabs. The other queries that come are from cricketing nations because of MJ and KS."

An interesting fact about lagoon crabs is that previously they were only available in Singapore. Ironically, Lankans used to travel to Singapore to get those crabs.

But today, Ministry of Crab has become a celebration of Sri Lanka, not importing any of its ingredients. They also offer crab-cooking lessons, charging a nominal fee from the guests who are interested.

However one question still remains, after the gastronomical treat we enjoyed at the restaurant. When will Dale Steyn and the South African team come here to enjoy this new partnership between Sangakkara and Jayawardene? □

"ANYONE IS WELCOME. I WILL INVITE MY INTERNATIONAL MATES HERE IN THE COMING WEEKS," SAYS SANGAKKARA.

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