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PLUS

A flourishing French connection

By Yomal Senerath-Yapa

How Baguette is building its presence in Colombo

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Stepping into Baguette down Queen's Road is like popping into a boulangerie-pâtisserie in France for here are stacks of cheery baguettes, croissants, pains au chocolat, quiches Lorraines, and also Paris-Brests, eclairs, macarons and croque-monsieurs.

When Nathalie Pujolle began Baguette exactly ten years back (further up Queen's Road – their new premises is much larger with a big car park) this Provençal had put behind her a corporate career in Tokyo and followed a pastry course at Le Cordon Bleu. She picked out from the map the Paradise Isle with an unerring eye as one of two Asian countries that did not possess its own artisan French bakery.



Some of Baguette's sweet temptations

Coming from Nîmes in Provence out of a family where quality food was important (made with the garden produce), Nathalie's journey with Baguette was not one of immediate conquest. While Colombo is under its spell today, at first few could appreciate the authentic French taste- the bread crust was perceived as too hard (no fat and sugar being added) while the croissants looked overbaked because they only used butter. "It took some time for customers to understand our quality and embrace our products," says Nathalie.

At Baguette their sourdough bread is their specialty. Many of the customers – residents and travellers say the products are better than most places in France as fewer and fewer French establishments do only sourdough bread and pure butter pastry made by hand in house, says Nathalie.

'Crowd pleasers' are (of course) the baguettes but also the rustic breads, the bagels, the croissants and the macarons. However to 'bridge' French tastes to Sri Lankans, they have savoury items like the spicy chicken croissant and the beef merguez crepe. "On the cake side however we stick to the French tradition and have not embarked on doing popular local sponge cake using artificial colours."

Their cakes range from a traditional Basque cake to a Tarte Tropézienne and their signature "Paris Colombo"- a Paris-Brest filled with peanut butter cream.

Baguette has built up a loyal clientele made up of Sri Lankans, foreigners and diplomats. Even during the pandemic when the outlets were closed they delivered daily across Colombo, helping increase customer base and loyalty.



Nathalie Pujolle

The entire logistics of the bakery is overseen by Nathalie while each team – bread, pastry, savoury- has a team head who supervises production which "we regularly taste collectively in house." All the baking is done on site, and baguettes and sourdough loaves, croissants and pastries are baked throughout the day.

They also retail a wide range of local products – cheese, jam, meat spreads, chocolate, tea and coffee.

The new Colombo outlet has a dining space three times the size of the original space and also facilitates French casual dining inspired by the comforting meals of the land of Michelin restaurants, the new menu featuring slow-cooked dishes, casseroles and baked specialties served exactly as they would be in France.

For instance Nathalie has introduced Egg en Cocotte where eggs are baked with cream and cheese in individual cast-iron cocottes, served alongside oven-roasted bread sticks for dipping.

Nathalie adds customers can expect an expanded breakfast and brunch menu, a wide range of gourmet sandwiches and a new dessert-in-a-jar collection.

While the core of the menu very a la Française indeed, Nathalie reminds they also do products of other countries- German pretzels, Polish cheese cake, American pumpkin pie, Middle Eastern zaatar fatayer to name a few.

Adds Nathalie, "Innovation as well as seasonality of products are very important for us- we will be soon promoting our Christmas collection and add new exciting products to our bakery and café range."

Baguette also has their Southern outlet at 321 Matara Road, Galle.