

Ceylon Tea Market Founders Story

Brewing a NEW LEGACY

LARA DE ZOYSA TRANSFORMS A DEEPLY PERSONAL INHERITANCE INTO A DIGITAL PLATFORM CONNECTING CEYLON TEA, TOURISM, EDUCATION, AND SOCIAL IMPACT WITH A GLOBAL AUDIENCE

Words: Tina Edward Gunawardhana
Photographs by London Eye Production House

For Lara De Zoysa, tea was never simply a beverage. It was the scent that lingered through childhood corridors, the landscape of school holidays spent among mist-covered estates, and the rhythm of an industry that quietly shaped her long before she realised it would one day define her own entrepreneurial journey. As the daughter of the late Michael De Zoysa, one of Sri Lanka's respected tea personalities, Lara grew up surrounded by the world of Ceylon Tea, yet for years deliberately chose another path, building her own career in business development far from the plantations and tea rooms that had framed her early years.

consumers with authentic Ceylon Tea while creating opportunity for Sri Lankan producers and estate communities.

At the heart of her work is a deeply personal purpose: honouring a legacy while reshaping it for a new generation. From championing small producers to highlighting the women whose labour sustains the industry, Lara's approach reflects both commercial clarity and emotional commitment. In conversation, she speaks candidly about grief, inheritance, innovation, and responsibility – and why the future of tea must include both heritage and humanity.

You grew up closely connected to Sri Lanka's tea industry through your father, Michael De Zoysa. What memories or experiences from those early years inspired you to eventually launch Ceylon Tea Market?

I grew up immersed in the world of tea, although at the time I did not fully realise how deeply it would shape me. Some of

my earliest memories are of running through the corridors of the Lipton office at Lipton Circus and sitting in the tea room surrounded by that unmistakable aroma of fresh tea. It felt almost like part of my DNA.

Many school holidays were spent in the hill country on tea estates, watching the rhythm of daily life, the dedication of the workers, and the extraordinary landscapes that define Sri Lanka's tea-growing regions. It was vibrant, hardworking and incredibly humbling.

Yet despite growing up in that environment, I had absolutely no intention of following in my father's footsteps. In fact, I resisted it. I was determined to create my own identity, separate from everything he represented.

But life has a way of bringing you back. However much I tried to move in another direction, our paths always seemed to intersect, whether sitting with him for hours at the SSC or later working with him when he launched his own tea brand.



My father shaped me in ways I only understood much later. His discipline was extraordinary. He began his day at five in the morning and often worked until midnight, balancing tea, cricket, church and family with remarkable commitment. He never left anything unfinished. He was direct, forthright and unapologetically driven – qualities not always easily understood, but ones that left a lasting mark on me.

When he passed away, a part of me went with him. It took me nearly five years to process that loss and understand what my own purpose might be. Ceylon Tea Market was born from that journey.

In many ways, I may not have intended to follow in his footsteps, but I found myself walking alongside them. This platform is not simply a business; it is a continuation of his legacy, reimagined through my own lens, and inspired in part by the 'Tea Hub' vision he spoke of during his final speech at the 125th CTTA Annual General Meeting in 2019.

Although you built a career in business development, what ultimately inspired you to choose tea and return to this heritage industry?

After my A Levels, I left for the United States – what I often call flying the coop. My father was a strict man, so suddenly finding myself in an environment with no rules or expectations felt like freedom in its purest form.

Yet despite the distance, there was never a disconnect. This was before mobile phones, and I spent hours each week making collect calls simply to speak with him. Even through rebellion, that bond remained.

I built my own career in business development across several industries, intentionally separate from tea. It was always present in the background, but I did not see it as my own future.

The turning point came in 2023 when the Sri Lanka Tea Board visited the UK on a promotional roadshow. I met Chairman Niraj De Mel, whose understanding of the industry was deeply insightful. He spoke very openly about how Ceylon Tea had lost visibility globally despite its extraordinary heritage and quality.

What struck me most was his observation that buyers across the UK – from the Midlands to Scotland and Wales – were actively looking for Ceylon Tea yet struggling to access it.

My immediate thought was simple: why not create a digital platform?

I had already been exploring the idea of a Sri Lankan tea marketplace, but that conversation sharpened the concept into what is now Ceylon Tea Market.

The idea soon expanded beyond tea sales. We developed four pillars: Tea Market, Tea Holidays, Tea Learning and We Give Back – creating not just a marketplace, but an ecosystem that connects product, people, education and purpose.

What began as a plan to onboard five suppliers has now grown to fifteen suppliers, more than 300 tea varieties, and over 25 tea tourism properties. That moment made me realise this was not merely an opportunity; it was a responsibility.

Why did you structure Ceylon Tea Market around four pillars?

From the beginning, I knew I did not want to build just another e-commerce platform because tea is never just a product. It is a story, culture and community.

Tea Market creates direct access between Sri Lankan suppliers and global buyers, while also giving visibility to smaller producers, single estates and artisanal growers who often struggle to reach international markets.



Tea Holidays allows people to experience tea at its source – walking through estates, meeting workers, hand-plucking leaves and understanding the landscapes behind every cup. When you witness that process firsthand, your relationship with tea changes entirely.

Tea Learning was created to make tea knowledge accessible. Tea can seem complex – from grades and elevations to brewing rituals and flavour profiles – so we want to simplify that world while preserving its richness.

We Give Back is the heart of everything. A percentage of transactions supports estate communities, especially women who form the backbone of the industry.

We work with organisations such as the Tea Leaf Trust, supporting IT and education initiatives that empower young women. We have also partnered with the Annie Prans Foundation, helping women and children affected by trauma and abuse.

Following Cyclone Dituwa, we raised funds and sent over 150 kilograms of essential goods to support members of the Ceylon Artisanal Tea Association after entire estates were devastated.

This reflects something deeply personal. My father believed strongly in helping others move forward in life. As I build this platform, I carry that belief with me.

How are you positioning Ceylon Tea Market across the UK and Europe?

Our goal is to establish Ceylon Tea Market as the premier digital hub for authentic Ceylon Tea.

We are not promoting one brand – we are championing the entire industry. Every estate, every producer and every experience on our platform is given equal importance, whether globally recognised or small-scale.

From the UK, we are strategically positioned to reintroduce authentic Ceylon Tea to Europe by bridging the gap between producer and consumer.

We do this by creating direct supplier access, enhancing transparency through digital tools, and building a premium, unified international presence for Ceylon Tea.

Consumers can receive orders within one, three, seven or fourteen days depending on location, making access simple and efficient. At the same time, we are positioning Ceylon Tea as what it truly is: a premium heritage product – ethically sourced, often handpicked, organic and artisanal in character.

Why is highlighting women in tea so important to you?

The truth is simple: the tea industry would not exist without women.

More than 60% of the workforce are female tea pluckers, yet many remain unseen and undervalued despite sustaining Sri Lanka's largest export industry.

The truth is simple the tea industry would not exist without women. More than 60% of the workforce are female tea plucker yet many remain unseen and undervalued despite sustaining Sri Lanka's largest export industry. Tea plucking is high skilled work requiring precision and generational knowledge, yet it is rarely recognised as a profession

Tea plucking is highly skilled work requiring precision and generational knowledge, yet rarely recognised as a profession.

Through Ceylon Tea Market, I want to change that narrative and bring attention to hands behind every cup. One idea I'm passionate about is introducing structured certification for tea pluckers, potentially organisations such as Tea Leaf Trust institutions like City & Guilds.

Imagine tea pluckers recognised as certified professionals, trained not only in plucking but also in terroir, flavour profiles, brew methods, English and digital literacy. That kind of recognition creates digital mobility and future opportunity.

What legacy do you hope to build?

This is deeply personal. My father, a visionary who spoke about ideas such as e-auctions and tea hubs long before they were realities. In many ways, Ceylon Tea Market is an extension of that thinking, brought into today's digital world.

I hope to build something that preserves heritage, creates opportunities for Sri Lankan suppliers, connects global audiences to the story of tea, and uplifts the community behind it.

If I can honour his legacy while create something meaningful for the next generation I have achieved what I set out to do