

BY MAFELOU C. LEAGOGO-AGRIAM

Endearing, ENCHANTING EXTRAORDINARY

What spell has Sulu Garden Restaurant in Miag-ao cast on people that they keep on returning time and again? There must be something very extraordinary about this place that even Iloilo City dwellers are willing to travel for over an hour-and-a-half, unmindful of several road inconveniences along the southern towns, just to reach Sulu Garden and savor its rustic pleasures.



A bewitching Sulu Garden Restaurant at night

No doubt, the tasty food is Sulu Garden Restaurant's main drawing power. But if truth be revealed, a lot of equally delightful edibles are also served in many top-grade dining places in the city, and along the towns one passes through to get to Miag-ao. What therefore makes a dining experience in Sulu Garden Restaurant extra special, you may ask?

For one, the manner of serving large portions of food is exceedingly fascinating. Where else in this part of the country can you find big servings placed on boat-like trays? Imagine a variety of Japanese cuisine served on a standard sushi boat. Or sizeable slices of meats and fish on the so-called Cleopatra's Barge carved like an Egyptian boat, and the enormous provisions churned out from Sulu's kitchen served on the bigger Princess Olayra I (a golden vessel named after a fairy

reputed to inhabit the restaurant's premises) or the Princess Olayra II (a modern Japanese refrigerated tanker). These huge, wooden boats never fail to amaze onlookers and are sure headturners for their sheer size and oddity.

Add to that, one's appetite for food is always greatly heightened when dining outdoors or close to an attractive country garden. Sulu Garden Restaurant is surrounded by plentiful sights and sounds from the bounties of nature. The flowering trees, plants, shrubs, vines, etc. — all growing naturally on fertile grounds — are a soothing balm to the harried soul and spirit. Blending beautifully into the scenic surrounding is a nearby forest of mahogany trees, home to a variety of birds whose melodious trills are far-reaching. At Sulu Garden Restaurant, you can't help but feel as if you're transported to an enchanted terrain that brings out the child full of wonder in you.

Meanwhile, between the thick forest and the garden restaurant is a creek that stretches to the Sulu Sea. In summer when the water bed dries up, an adventurous customer can cross the creek and hike up into the woods; during the rainy season when the tributary fills up, the daring can catch fish. Legend has it that Princess Olayra, riding on her golden ship, passes this body of water on

a full moon.

The creek and the restaurant are located below a busy national highway and a Spanish stone bridge built in 1873. The bridge, it is learned, is the last of the eight stone bridges that connected Miag-ao to the south and has been useful since the Spanish era. It is a few paces away from the entrance of UP in the Visayas, Miag-ao Campus. As your eyes scan the bridge when dining *al fresco* at Sulu Garden Restaurant, never forget that this solid structure is 145-years-old.

And then everyday at dusk, a most stunning sight unfolds. More than 8,000 fruit-eating bats (small island flying foxes) fly above the garden restaurant, having left a *babog* tree where they roost behind the town's municipal hall. Without fail at twilight time these nocturnal mammals move en masse towards the mountains of Antique. There will always be something new, strange but interesting to discover and learn in the countryside about order in the diversity of nature, God's creation, and folktales that never die.

What's in store inside the restaurant? The white-and-red-colored Sulu Garden Restaurant offers another set of experience indoors, like a Japanese Zen garden ambience. One discovers a spacious, high-ceilinged dining salon with artificial cherry blossom trees, a floor-to-ceiling rock wall with



The restaurant is surrounded by a plethora of lush greeneries.



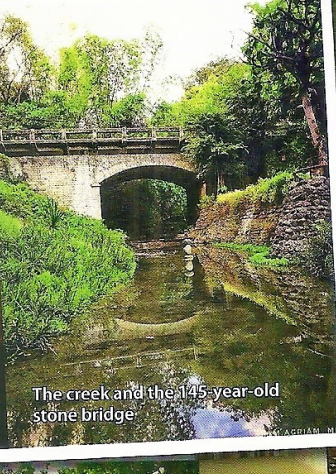
A pond amidst a profusion of plants



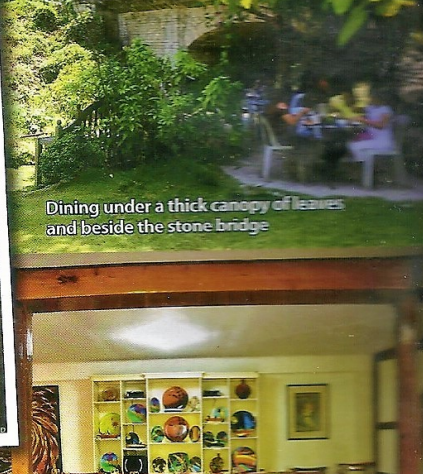
Jonathan and Aras welcome their guests into the Sulu Garden.



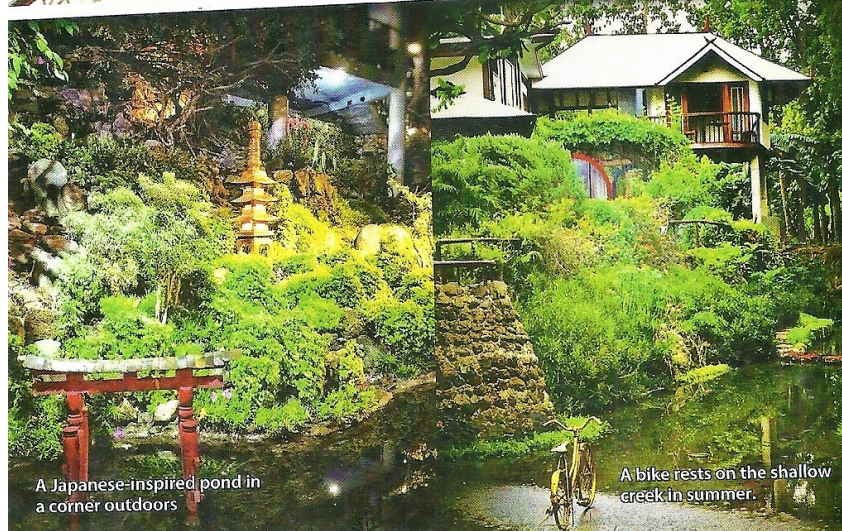
A refreshing view of the yonder garden from inside.



The creek and the 145-year-old stone bridge

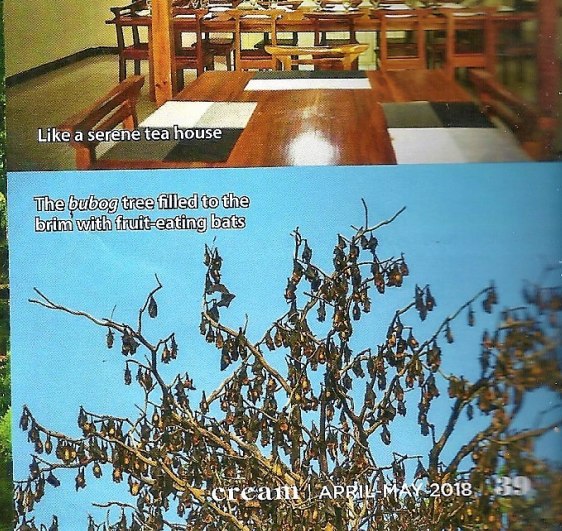


Dining under a thick canopy of leaves and beside the stone bridge



A Japanese-inspired pond in a corner outdoors

A bike rests on the shallow creek in summer.



Like a serene tea house

The bubog tree filled to the brim with fruit-eating bats

waterfall gently cascading over the rocks and some greeneries, a row of bamboos stretching upward to the ceiling, and a wide pond where tiny fishes gently nip on the restaurant customers' toes submerged in water. It's a soothing way to pass the time.

Over animated conversations during a repast, Spanish, French or Italian music in the salon may be heard, subtly setting the mood of the day. Expats from Asia, Europe and the US who have concerns in Miag-ao and nearby towns love to converge in this dining area for laid-back fun and camaraderie.

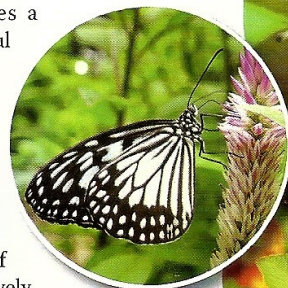
An air-conditioned room — much smaller in size and with charming old-fashioned windows overlooking the bucolic garden outdoors — is just across the salon. Subdued conversations are suggested here since tables and chairs are arranged close to the others. This enclosed corner of Sulu Garden Restaurant resembles a pretty, private tea room with a beautiful collection of brightly painted glass plates on the cabinet created by Sulu's staff artists.

Still further on from the salon is another unique room—Sulu's Art Gallery. It pays tribute to Miag-ao. The centers of attraction are two huge tables that contain vignettes of the town's rich historical past impressively depicted through dioramas: from the Spanish period and on to the Philippine-American War. The countless miniature costumed figures and some structures like Miag-ao Church, native houses, boats, coconut trees, etc. are made in a workshop within the restaurant. They are based on historical research. A comprehensive summary of the tributes may be read on the wall. A piece of advice: The dioramas are meant to be looked at and not touched.

By now you must be keenly curious and eager to ask: Who is the genius behind this amazing countryside destination? The visionary, creator and

architect of the ever-evolving Sulu Garden Restaurant is Jonathan Matias, a native of Imus, Cavite, who was first attracted to Miag-ao's sunset, history and serenity in 1995 before deciding to stay around much longer. He bought a parcel of land in 1997 where the restaurant now stands.

"It was a swampy land with an abandoned bakery building from the 1980's and an adjacent, hidden, historically-unknown stone



bridge," he said. Local folklores describe Sulu's location as the most enchanted place in Miag-ao.

His young Antiqueña wife, Aras, describes him perfectly: one who speaks like an American but works like a Japanese. True, Jonathan is a versatile innovator and trailblazer. "When I was young I thought I can change the world. Now, I just wish to make an impact in a much smaller world around me," he said.

He is a man with many impressive attributes, past, present, future. He is a product of the New York University; once a 40+ years resident of the Big Apple; an ex-soldier in the US Army when he was young; an extensive world traveler; a biologist for life; founder and owner of a biomedical research company; a restaurateur; a cultivated man fascinated with antiquities, culture, history, and literature, among other non-science-related intellectual pursuits; and a renaissance man who seeks to revive love and respect for nature, the arts, heritage and the past.

More than four decades ago, Jonathan worked in a New York-based science-related research



Jonathan with restaurant guests Dr. Pia Agriam, Joeboy and Mafelou Agriam, and Nono Palmos

Battle of Miag-ao Salakayan May 7, 1754



A diorama on Miag-ao; left photos: different species of butterflies choose their favorite flowers in the restaurant's garden.

foundation. He rose to become its highest-ranking biologist and by 1990 established his own research company. Today, the latter's research projects are located worldwide with country managers looking after project operations and continuity. Thanks to speedy modern communications and technology, he monitors their status and progress right in the four corners of his den in Miag-ao. Incidentally, Jonathan and his wife live in the mezzanine floor of the garden restaurant.

Was he dead serious when he said he has a seven-year itch? Meaning, he needs to move to another country after staying for seven long years in one place. At the moment his sights are set on an island in Greece, or maybe in Bhutan, places that are less-travelled, one would think.

Perhaps, this might all be wishful thinking because Jonathan has big plans for his restaurant's continuing growth and progress. A major one is to make Sulu Garden Restaurant a vibrant venue for artists from here and abroad, where they can mix and mingle over food, music, nature and collaborative interactions, the result of which will, who knows, create a one-of-a-kind visual art gallery someday.

How will he go about it, what fruits will it bear, what will the gallery look like are areas of concern everyone who has encountered this enigmatic, unpretentious guy is excited to know about. After all, Jonathan has always done his stuff extraordinarily. The guy is absolutely a cut above the rest.



Delicious food served on large boat trays

