

There's more than one layer to this cake venture

By ANNA LEE

IT is not uncommon for naysayers to be critical of best friends starting a business together. Business, after all, deals with money, which many a time strains even familial ties.

But long-time friends Robin Pho and Darryl Lim will tell you that it is not just about bringing in the dough.

Their online kueh lapis business, Kue, has seen significant success by receiving rave reviews and acquiring adoring customers – a testament to the strength of their friendship and their sound business ethos.

It started with an earnest desire to help Mr Lim out. Then, he was working crazy hours but charging a meagre sum for his kueh lapis with Martell VSOP Cognac which was sold alongside his family's hawker business. Things were worse during the festive season when orders piled up and to exacerbate matters, costs were rising.

"Hawkers don't have the business development plan; you just work, work, and work. You don't have the time to plan and neither can you see whatever is inside (the box) because you're already inside. So my way of running the business was the hawker centre, old-fashioned kind, because that was what was passed down to me," Mr Lim explains.

Witnessing the unfairness of the whole system, Mr Pho and another partner stepped in. Mr Lim describes them as "the guys outside the box who could see pretty clearly how to develop the whole thing to another stage".

Mr Lim recounts: "Robin came and told me: 'Hey there's this thing called the Internet you know.' So we started out with the website and it was a huge thing. We went through many weeks of brainstorming and planning."

He attributes the success of Kue to the collaboration among the three of them. I am fine with baking, but not operationally sound administratively, Mr Lim says.

The humble traditional family business of Mr Lim has since been transformed into a classy premium online outfit that has taken off with the younger generation.

Kue is now in full opera-



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Best buds: (from left) Darryl Lim and Robin Pho, directors of Kue

tion during the Chinese New Year period and receives corporate orders during off-peak seasons, offering premium kueh lapis, including gluten-free or wheat-free alternatives.

During non-festive seasons, Kue caters mainly to the corporate crowd with larger orders.

Testament to their success is how quickly their five-figure investment broke even within the first few months of operations.

More than that though, the fact that there have been cases where groups of overseas guests requested their hotel's concierge to help them purchase Kue's kueh lapis – and Kue's only – has affirmed the founders of their success.

One magazine even dubbed them the "Louis Vuitton of kueh lapis and when we hear things like that it makes us feel very happy", says Mr Pho.

The three believe that their pool of loyal customers and growing demand from corporates, are built from the uncompromised quality of the cakes.

Mr Lim admits that the making of the batter is perhaps not the most complex, but it is the amount of time that has to be spent and the nitty gritty of the process that differentiates Kue from run-of-the-mill kueh lapis.

"What makes Kue so great is that we don't use huge commercial ovens so they are baked individually so the consistency of each cake is the same. I also don't use big machines and everything is hand-made, hand folded, the flour, the eggs, and the butter," Mr Lim explains.

He adds that the ingredients are all fresh and asserts that the Martell cannot be substituted at all.

Cakes are delivered hot and fresh to the customers, another assurance of the quality of their products.

Kue is also looking forward to hosting their second baking class at Tools of The Trade to share the joys of baking kueh lapis.

When questioned if conducting baking classes was akin to selling their recipe to success, Mr Pho replies with a smile, "You can find the recipe quite easily, but to dedicate two to three hours to do it is another thing altogether. And Darryl, he's a perfectionist."

"He has to have the freshest ingredients, so even if you have the same recipe, it's not something you can easily replicate... you definitely can't replace 20 years of experience."

However, the current success of Kue has yet to warrant taking the business to running full steam even during non-peak seasons, as demand for kueh lapis is largely seasonal.

The best friends still hold on to their day jobs: Mr Pho runs his own family business, while Mr Lim manages a cafe in Tiong Bahru.

Holding day jobs may also have given them some leeway in the business, as they need not be entirely driven by profits since they don't depend on the business for a living.

Still, the passion driving them means that when regular customers make last-minute orders, Kue fulfils them regardless of the rush.

Deals like these often incur a cost, Mr Pho highlights. But he adds: "We're not driven by our bottom line or profit, so we do it because it's important to the customer. I think what we've learnt is that even

though it is a side business, we need to keep our promises and it is important to deliver on your word and keep your word."

Kue's desire to be more than a money-making business is also evident in their corporate social responsibility efforts.

"We wanted to be a pro-society business, something that Singaporeans can be proud of... Kue is a side business so we wanted to do something to help the community as well," Mr Pho explains.

Realising that jobs such as processing orders are within the capabilities of those with physical disabilities, they thought: "Why don't we give these people a chance?"

In collaboration with the Society for the Physically Disabled (SPD), they hired two people with physical disabilities.

They also applied for the open-door fund – that provides a comprehensive package of incentives to support companies' employment of individuals with special needs – and in the process learnt that people with disabilities are "just as capable as any other person and sometimes even more committed and driven to excel at the job and opportunity they are given", says Mr Pho.

While they have received mixed success from the collaborations, Mr Pho maintains that overall, they are "very happy to have collaborated with SPD", and that Kue is exploring how else to work with the organisation.

And despite the struggles of operating a business, it is clear that their tight friendship has hardly been affected.

Says Mr Lim: "I've known this guy for more than 20 years and he has always been the eco-friendly type. It's in him that he wants to help the society, save the world. When he was in school he wanted to be an environmentalist not a business man!"

Mr Pho adds: "As a business, you definitely have to make money to stay alive, but if you can help the community at that, it's win-win. You don't have to be the most profitable company."

"If you know you have provided employment to someone with a decent job and a product with a premium quality, which brings joy to people, then I think it's a good thing to society."