Health foodies mixing it up

Brother-sister duo who successfully run two salad shops in SMU eye launching franchise in five years, reports TEH SHI NING

Healthy fast food is no oxymoron and is gentle on the wallet too, says Jocelyn and Joseph Chan. This brother-sister duo, “Chief Saladiers” of a fresh pair of salad shops on the Singapore Management University (SMU) campus, are now banking on others to agree.

Sal Happy Salads’ express and bistro outlets may be just two weeks old, but it has been two years since Ms Chan started selling her rice-based pre-packed salads, first to friends and then to other students via SMU’s student-run cafes.

“There was nothing really healthy to eat around school, especially if you wanted a quick but substantial meal. So I thought, why not come up with something,” says Ms Chan, who had in mind the busy student whose back-to-back classes from morning till afternoon left little time for a decent lunch.

What first occurred to the 23-year-old “health foodie” as an alternative to “sorely missed” salads in a slow-moving second-year seminar was to sell home-made salads into a formalised kitchen-made menu of salads old via student cafes on campus.

Then came the dilemma as graduation drew near earlier this year: to join the corporate world or turn Sal Happy Salads into a full-fledged affair. Different voices weighed in on either side, leaving her “very torn between finding a job and setting this up”, says the marketing and communications graduate.

But it helped that the only other route she was seriously considering was consulting. So when doors on that front closed and she was granted the lease for the two shoplots on either side of campus, and with the cashiers starting ringing up sales, prep for the next day begins.

Day-to-day operations, now that both outlets have been soft-launched as training and managing their team of six full-time staff in preparation for January’s grand opening, occupy their thoughts and time fully now. But they have a roadmap of where they’re headed too.

“Our aim is to be a franchise model, fast food 2.0 – a lot of our inspiration we get from McDonald’s,” says Ms Chan.

She has set her sights on opening another wholly owned outlet in the next 18 months and launching the franchise in five years.

While that is a long way away, the duo aim to put the building blocks in place now. “When we plan our HR, our kitchen flow, our systems, it’s all with the mindset that eventually, we want to franchise this,” says Mr Chan. “Whether we reach that or not, at least from the start that is our goal,” he laughs.

That dose of realism is not unwarranted, as the red-panned Saladiers are well aware of the challenges of the line of business they have picked.

“In F&B, the main stumbling block is the high fixed cost,” says Ms Chan. “Rentals, labour costs, utilities are very high. If you make 100 sales, you might be treading water, but if you’re making 200 sales, suddenly you’re making money hand over fist,” says Mr Chan. “It’s a very good sword, it cuts very well, but if you don’t swing it well you cut yourself!”

They expect to break even within two semesters, taking into account the inevitable wax and wane of sales with the school term. The bistro outlet at the SMU Administration Building, which has seating, is thus meant to target their other target customer segment – working executives crowding in the area.

And they seem confident that their differentiated salads, inspired by Grandma’s chicken salad recipe and the pasta and rice salads of Chinese fast-food bars, will catch on.

“Salads are usually greens, so we brown rice for a more substantial meal. We’ve also added rice noodles for a more substantial meal and pre-pack it, so the cost goes down and we can offer fast-food pricing,” says Mr Chan.

Business is brisk especially during breaks, says Mr Chan. “Our turn-around per customer is only about 20-30 seconds so we can do a lot of customers within a 15-minute break.”

The duo consider themselves fortunate to have sailed past what is a major hurdle for most aspiring entrepreneurs – finding capital. Sal Happy Salads did not qualify for Spring Singapore’s YES! Start-ups funding scheme as it lacked an innovative process, but their father helped by taking a 90 per cent stake.

The Saladiers are quick to stress the business-minded nature of this arrangement though. They have a repayment schedule drawn up to buy back shares from their father.

But beyond financial support, their parents have been supportive with encouragement and practical advice on business and logistic matters, they say. Also, the father of Ms Chan’s boyfriend helped with contractor contacts for renovations, while friends with F&B experience chipped in with tips on kitchen planning and the National Environment Agency licence. So the boost social networks have given in certainly not lost on them. They had budgeted for an initial capital outlay of $110,000 for both outlets, but spent $60,000 in the end.

Teething problems with quality and supplies need ironing out too, but feedback from old regulars has helped, as has responsiveness on their part.

“Our pumpkin salad is now really popular, but what people don’t know is that based on feedback, we’ve tweaked the recipe several times in the last two years, just to get that sweet spot,” Mr Chan says.

Contrary to commonly perpetuated notions of it “being so glam to be your own boss”, it can in fact feel “really tedious”, he says. “Every day, you’re sweating bullets, missing deadlines, needing to get three 100 pieces in place to push out one salad, it’s not glamorous at all.”

Ms Chan too admits it was more stressful than she had expected, “but now that it’s up and things are beginning to even out, it’s really enjoyable – not easy, especially in F&B, but really enjoyable.”

And for Mr Chan, more fulfilment than his old desk job. “Here, I get to see the customers smile, hand them coffee or salad, speak to them – it’s a lot more hands-on. It may not be everybody’s cup of tea, but for me it’s great,” he says.

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