

UOB-SMU Entrepreneurship Alliance Centre



A “new” look at traditional dishes: New Soon Huat shows the way

Established in January 2011, New Soon Huat Bak Kut Teh is located along Jalan Kayu at a stretch of road more known for its *roti pratas* than Chinese food. That did not stop the founders, ex-offenders who have broken away from old habits to embark on “new” lives. Therein lies the significance of the word “new” in the company and restaurant name.

Living out their mission as a self-sufficient social enterprise offering delicious local cuisines, while providing job opportunities and skills development for ex-offenders, the eatery has already passed the crucial “taste” test. According to an online article, on weekdays, the restaurant welcomes over 150 diners every day; the number doubles on weekends with queues of more than 10 people.

The eatery was able to cover its operating costs after 3.5 months of operation, although it needed more time to recoup the capital outlay. Today, more than a year on, the company is exploring the possibility of dishing out its popular Chinese delicacies like *bak kut teh*, braised pig trotter, ginger sesame chicken, steamed pomfret and other local delights to a new demographic group; it is also looking at opening a second restaurant.

Only the best will do

In the very competitive local F&B scene, eateries have to work hard to distinguish themselves. Some stake their claims with signature dishes while others make their mark with their specialty foods and niche dishes.

Eateries can be categorised according to a host of criteria ranging from the cuisine they serve, with broad descriptions like “western food” to ever-more specific definitions such as “European”, “French”, “Italian”, to the exact types of foods they serve, such as “fish and chips” and “soups”. Across the continents, the same myriad definitions also apply, with countless examples. There are “Chinese” restaurants, “Hong Kong” cuisine, “Teochew” or “Hokkien” food as well as eateries that serve “*dim sum*” and “*xiao long pau*”. Then there are the generic references to “Grandma’s” cuisine and “traditional favourites” as well as themed eateries.

That Singaporeans love their food has spawned a vibrant F&B business segment. With increasing exposure to the world, diners have also become more discerning about their food options. Not only does the food have to taste good, there is increasing emphasis on the location, ambience and service. Price is no longer the only defining factor when people eat out; nor is it the key requisite.

Research shows that location is a big influencer when selecting an eating place. This becomes more apparent when transport is limited, such as during supper time. However, living up to their reputation as foodies, up to 65% of respondents surveyed said they will overlook an inconvenient location if the food is exceptionally good.

Familiarity is another deciding factor, and in this case, the older generation appears to have the final say as they bring their younger charges for traditional foods like *bak kut teh* and Chinese *zi char* dishes. By contrast, these dishes are not usually associated with teenagers or people in their 20s. Even during workday lunch breaks, diners do not often order *bak kut teh*, citing the troublesome and time-consuming task of having to separate the pork from its bones.

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A “new” dining experience

As consumers become more sophisticated, they are no longer satisfied with single product purchases. Rather, they are looking for the overall experience. So a visit to the spa comprises more than the treatment; it also includes a tranquil ambience that is a combination of the spa setting, furnishings, music and perhaps a spa ritual that is carried out by the soft-spoken and gentle staff.

The service industry has been quick to hop on the “experience” bandwagon to win new clients. Similarly, F&B outlets can offer a fulfilling dining experience by indulging not just the palate but the other senses. A well-located eatery with a novel concept, attractive interiors, cosy ambience, and specialty foods that are renowned for their superb quality – even if they are traditional foods – will be a hit with a younger demographic group. Reaching out to their innate sense of adventure for refreshing and interesting experiences, the 20-somethings will have no qualms paying for experiences that enrich their lives.

“New” ideas and markets

The company had approached the SME Consulting Programme, managed by UOB-SMU Entrepreneurship Alliance, to get a better understanding of the preferences of patrons aged 17 to 21, and 22 to 26. Specifically, the founders wanted to know their views about Chinese delicacies and what they look for in a restaurant. “The focus-group survey and competitive market research... has provided us with good insights on what the younger patrons look for,” said Mok Tuck Onn, Director of the company. The findings helped them “crystallise” their expansion strategy and provided useful input for their brand positioning and menu portfolio to cater to a new demography.

The student-consultants tapped on their knowledge from business school to offer viable solutions to real problems. “Our goals were to examine the symptoms, establish the core issues and talk to consumers to gain useful insights and a better understanding,” said a student-consultant. From the research, the team came up with “creative and logical recommendations that the client can easily implement”. The hands-on project provided them with an understanding of the “challenges faced by small start-ups” as well as key factors that can make or break a business.

The project was not without its hurdles and false starts, with the first road bump occurring at the proposal stage when the client expressed reservations about engaging a team comprising student-consultants. However, a substantially-revised proposal which provided a “clear direction and executable plan” paved the way for the final go-ahead, said Yeo Ai Ling, Project Adviser. The initial setback had, in fact, made the team all the more determined to succeed – which they did.

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