



An Insatiable Appetite for Tasty, Nutritional Food

Traditional food caterers tend to grow by expanding the range of their menu offerings, the taste of their dishes and/or presentation, and perhaps, by streamlining their order fulfilment. But the growth trajectory of KCK Food Catering Pte Ltd shows that it is anything but traditional. Since its catering business commenced in August 1991, it has proven itself to be an “early mover” in many aspects of the food industry, and has reaped rewards for its entrepreneurialism. Not one to sit on its laurels, the company has continued to chart new ground as it explores various ways to bring tasty, nutritional food to a wider clientele.

KCK Founder James Kwok, an engineer by training, made his foray into the food industry when he acquired KCK Food Catering in May 1997. A man with foresight, he soon grew the traditional food catering business to provide for a wide range of customers, supporting such diverse events as corporate functions, private parties and special occasions like weddings, BBQs and buffet meals. At a time when few companies recognised the power of an Internet presence, Mr Kwok had created a KCK website – the first food caterer in Singapore to do so. “With our own domain, we get very high rankings during SEO (search engine optimisation),” shares Grace Ng, KCK Director. The company benefitted from this first-mover advantage and even today, it consistently pops up as the top few companies during keyword searches related to its core catering business.



Mr James Kwok, Founder of KCK Food Catering

Given the entrepreneurial leadership that has a voracious appetite to be the customers’ choice for tasty and nutritional food, Mr Kwok and his team have proven adept at keeping ahead of the business curve both behind the scenes and in more visible ways, blending personal insights with bold ideas, and innovation with technology. When the inevitable price war brewed among the catering companies, they had already moved ahead with more product lines and client segments.

Constantly hungry while looking into the future, KCK acquired Swan Lake Food in 2006 and moved into manufacturing, extending its production capabilities to include *kuehs* (traditional small snacks and desserts) and *bak changs* (steamed glutinous rice with fillings, wrapped in bamboo leaves). SLFI was also set up to serve the Muslim community with halal food items. Their various kitchens were then supplying frozen items such as soup stocks and sauces; sushi, *bak changs* and *kuehs* to restaurants, shops and supermarkets. In 2007, the company was rebranded as KCK Food, with the tagline “Healthy & Tasty”, signalling a new commitment to its customers.

Happy tummies, happy mummies

As the business environment evolved, the SME, like other companies, was facing “too much ambiguity”, shares Ms Ng, citing challenges ranging from manpower to business costs, “bad debts and slow payments”. For example, as a food company, logistics was integral to their operations – “we had to deliver 1,000 orders a day!” and the manpower crunch proved to be a growing hurdle. The challenges gave them the added impetus to explore more innovative products and technology to optimise operations.

In the early 2000s, they discerned a niche in ready-meals, and the team was able to tap on their food and technology know-how to launch the YeYeah Delights brand of chilled, ready-meals. Each sealed,

bento-style meal was “blast-chilled” at between two- and five-degree Celsius – “not frozen” as Ms Ng is quick to point out – thus retaining their freshness and taste. Designed to be “wholesome, convenient and hygienic”, the had five meal plans catering to the whole family – family members, mothers during the confinement period, for weight loss, school-going children, and the elderly and convalescent.

The concept resonated well with their customers but there was “no critical mass”. As Ms Ng explains it, customers were “too lazy” to heat up the meals, even though it would take only a minute or two in a microwave oven; diners also had the mistaken notion that ready-meals were “not fresh”. The innovation was ahead of its time, and it was an uphill task to change mindsets. But things would prove different in the next few years, when a November 2017 Euromonitor report registered a growing trend in the value and volume of the ready-meals market in Singapore, as different players introduced more variety and sophistication.

Wholesome, healthful nourishment

Keeping true to its vision to bring tasty, nutritional food to a broader audience, the team merged with Newstart Health to offer customers a range of wholesome breads, cakes, dried fruits, nuts and chia seeds under the brand Five Loaves. On trend with its organic loaves and other healthful products – many of which have received the HPB Healthier Choice symbol, marking them as having met the Board’s nutritional standards – the team was also biding its time as it stood ready to take another bite of the ready-meals market.



Wholesome range of products under the brand Five Loaves

While some SMEs have reported “Eureka!” light bulb moments of sudden realisation, KCK’s journey has been a consistent one fuelled by a visionary team. Underlined by a “passion to inculcate healthy living”, its focus has centred on the use of “quality ingredients” while foregoing the preservatives and



added sugar, salt and oil. Having developed the knowledge and manufacturing competencies over the years, and with the processes, technology and facilities in place, the team took advantage of synergies

in its core businesses to launch its own line of fresh pizzas. In January 2019, they piloted a six-month “proof-of-concept”, hot food lockers project at a local tertiary institution.

Strike while the oven is hot

The technology behind hot food lockers was familiar to Mr Kwok, who had seen them in Amsterdam about six years ago. He noted the potential even then, but knew that the time was not right as Singapore did not have the supporting infrastructure; nor was the community ready. Over the last few years however, as Singapore moved towards its Smart Nation vision and lifestyle expectations have changed, he and his team knew they had all the ingredients to drive their latest innovation – customisable pizzas placed in a food locker, ready for the customers’ collection and consumption.

Technology enables the whole kitchen-to-customer cycle. Customers would place their orders via their mobile device, including their taste preferences and collection time, and make payment. At their indicated time, customers can collect their piping-hot pizza from their allocated locker – no waiting, no fuss. At the back-end, a skeletal staff of one or two people will assemble and bake the pizzas according to the specifications, and have them ready for collection at the right time. Software keeps track of and powers the production cycle end-to-end.

As described by Ms Ng, with the latest food concept, they have “married old and new technology” to create a sustainable business. Customers, who are more health conscious these days, want tasty, healthy food that is convenient and represents good value, and the team, with its track record and resources, is confident of delivering it. Using technology to fulfil the process, there is no need for paper order forms or receipts. The pizzas are tailored to customers’ preferences, and packaging materials are biodegradable. “There is zero wastage,” summarises Ms Ng. Technology and an innovative food concept all contribute to a pleasant and seamless dining experience. We want to consistently bring JOY to our customers” says Ms Ng.