



Crafting A Culinary Legacy, One Dish At A Time: Lee Wee & Brothers

Over the course of its 23-year history, heritage food brand Lee Wee & Brothers has been continuously redefining itself, adapting to evolving customer tastes and preferences — all while preserving its roots and values. Born from one woman's love of cooking for others, the Lee family pivoted from their previous venture in the used-car business to create Lee Wee & Brothers. Their first outlet opened at Old Airport Road

Hawker Centre in 2000, featuring Madam Mary Teo's signature *otah* (or *otak-otak*). Food is Mdm Teo's love language, and her scrumptious *otah* was just one of the many heritage recipes she was known for. This, and her other culinary delights, were the main attractions at large, weekly family gatherings and when hosting guests.



Showcasing their family's heritage otah recipe, Lee Wee & Brothers started as a humble stall at Old Airport Road Hawker Centre in 2000.

Honouring the eldest of Mdm Teo's children, the company carries his name, but virtually every family member contributes to the business' operations. For instance, the signature giant aluminium *otah* signboard — now synonymous with the brand — was handcrafted by the youngest brother, Mark, and second brother, Ben, and was first displayed at the original stall. While that stall no longer exists, the brand has expanded significantly to one central kitchen and seven retail outlets across the country. From initially selling 900 sticks of *otah* per day, Lee Wee & Brothers now produces more than 10,000 daily. Its range has also broadened to include around 100 items, including *mee siam*, *lontong* and assam fish — all prepared from scratch at its central kitchen.

The eldest brother, Lee Wee; Ben; Mark; and Mark's wife, Angeline, are still actively involved in the business, from sourcing ingredients and managing suppliers to overseeing operations and sales. Even so, the company embraces change positively at the company, with younger family members like Darren — Mark and Angeline's son, who oversees new business and planning — injecting fresh ideas and tackling challenges inherent in maintaining a legacy business.



While Madam Mary Teo (seated, eating *otah*) provided her well-loved recipes, several family members continue to run the business today, including the company's namesake, Lee Wee (standing behind Mdm Teo, in black), his two brothers, Ben (standing, in blue short-sleeved shirt) and Mark (seated, with red bag), Mark's wife Angeline (standing, next to Mark), and Mark and Angeline's son, Darren (standing, with orange box).

Innovation: More than just meeting the *otah* quota

Although the kitchen and Mdm Teo's heritage recipes remain the heart of the business, the family recognises that product consistency is pivotal for the company's future growth. This, together with the supply issues exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, also reinforced the need for innovation, automation and digitisation.



Workers laboriously preparing freshly made otaah in the central kitchen, surrounded by boxes of coconut leaves.

Along with securing ISO22000 and ISO9001 certifications — in the form of a comprehensive food safety and quality management system — Darren shares that the company has also expanded to produce ready-to-eat and frozen foods distributed by local retailers. The products include frozen honey chicken wings, frozen mackerel chunky fish *otah* paste and frozen *otah* croquettes. Lee Wee & Brothers took this step to tackle both the changing tastes of today's diners and the volatility of raw materials supply. "During the pandemic, the supply disruption became apparent to us, especially with lockdown issues across borders and within a country from state to state," Darren explains. "Moreover, during long holidays and festive periods, we typically also experience (disruptions) in supply of items such as the coconut leaves used to wrap our *otah*." To mitigate these disruptions, the company frequently arranges for advanced orders of the leaves in large quantities, storing them in its chillers.

One answer to these challenges is innovation and finding different ways of enjoying *otah*, Darren suggests. He cites the introduction of new products like *otah mantou*, *otah* fries and *otah* croquettes that offer novel ways for consumers to savour the familiar flavours that Lee Wee & Brothers is renowned for. Alternatives to coconut leaves are also being explored, as their inconsistent form hinders the automation of the *otah*-filling process. This issue is also a significant factor behind *otah* production remaining a labour-intensive and hours-long process.



Transporting Lee Wee & Brothers products to its outlets across Singapore.

As for the company's operations, Darren introduced several changes, including transitioning many of the company's systems to the cloud, when he officially joined the company six years ago. As a result, he shares, "we move faster and lighter, and I am able to access a lot of crucial information even when I am overseas".

A culture of learning and experimentation

Although Darren practically "grew up" with the business — beginning as an 11-year-old boy helping out at the company's stall and food fairs during his school holidays — he admits to experiencing some initial apprehension when he first formally joined the company. Yet, he found that "intergenerational cohesiveness" eased much of the leadership transition. "There are tremendous opportunities for sharing knowledge and experience," he says. "I can easily tap on a senior's experience and apply it to new ways of doing things."



For instance, he introduced an innovative — and some may say, experimental — product for Valentine’s Day this year. Inspired by the design of Bottega Veneta clutch bags, the limited-edition Otah Minaudiere — handwoven from coconut leaves and filled with 10 vacuum-packed premium *otah* from Lee Wee & Brothers — successfully garnered attention for the brand. The product, which came packed in its own dust bag and was presented in a box along with a colourful floral arrangement, demonstrated the company’s creativity. “(Designing the bag) allowed me to indulge in my creative side,” Darren recalls. “It was definitely a good branding exercise. We created some excitement, and the bag helped us reach new (customer) segments.”

This growth mindset and a culture of learning permeate the company, but Darren was quick to note it did not occur by chance. Instead, a conducive environment for it was purposefully crafted. “We always like to get the team to share their challenges in meetings, and to think deeper into solutions and root causes,” he explains. “Setting aside a formal time for this actually helps the team, especially senior team members from the production line, to be more expressive with their thoughts.”

Serving local flavours to the world

Collaboration is another part of Lee Wee & Brothers’ growth strategy. Through the Enterprise Leadership for Transformation (ELT) by SMU programme, Darren is working together with fellow small- and medium-sized enterprise (SME) leaders on various projects. He also works with a mentor to guide his efforts on expanding internationally, taking his grandmother’s legacy to the world. “I am very passionate about building a heritage brand and identifying opportunities for growth,” he shares. “I strongly believe the academic insights and knowledge sharing that I obtained from the ELT modules will complement my practical skills and experience to take our brand to the next level.”



Lee Wee & Brothers is planning on expanding overseas with its star product that's "otah" this world!

This commitment to growing the business has a personal dimension as well. "I feel a sense of responsibility to take the business to new heights and ensure its longevity," Darren says. "I want to leave my stamp before I hand it to the next generation."