

BY VIVIEN SHIAO

STEPPING UP TO THE PLATE

Sisters Bernadette and Bonnie Wong behind Creative Eateries Group may look glam, but they have no qualms about getting their hands dirty as the second-generation leadership in the F&B business

THINK of young professionals in the food and beverage (F&B) sector, and you are likely to imagine the owners of yet another hipster café. Sisters Bernadette and Bonnie Wong may not be that sort of entrepreneur, but they too are taking the road less travelled – they gave up cushy corporate careers to join their father’s business in the competitive, volatile F&B industry.

They credit dad Anthony Wong, CEO and founder of restaurant and catering business Creative Eateries Group, for inspiring them to bite the bullet. Despite having no plans to get involved at first, the sisters soon stepped up to the plate. As the company evolved and grew, so did their roles. Today, the pair are key decision makers in the group, with 320 people under their charge in Singapore.

Older sibling Bernadette, 30, is director of corporate affairs and human resources (HR); while Bonnie, 28, is director of marketing and business development.

HOW IT ALL STARTED

Growing up in an environment where food is taken seriously, the sisters’ education on running a company and all things edible started early. Says Bernadette: “When I was growing up, I was always quite inspired by our father. He would come home and tell us about his day and the challenges he faced. He was the one who gave us our first introduction to wine, to fine dining. For a kid to be encouraged by your father to try *foie gras* at a time when Singapore had none – that was the kind of experiences we had growing up.”

The food business has always been their father’s deep passion. Even before Mr Wong started his restaurants in 1992, he was F&B general manager for global hotel chain Hyatt. It was a role that entailed extensive travelling. At



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“IT’S HOW WE FUNCTION AS A FAMILY AND MOVE THE BUSINESS FORWARD IN THE RIGHT DIRECTION THAT MATTERS.”

– **Bonnie Wong** (right), *director of marketing and business development, Creative Eateries Group*

the age of four, Bernadette had already lived in both Taipei and Jakarta. To meet the needs of his young, growing family, Mr Wong decided not to continue his hospitality career and move back to Singapore for good.

He joined his father’s optical business briefly, but found that it did not invigorate him the way that F&B did. That was when he opened his first concept eatery – Hot Stones Steak and Seafood Restaurant at Clarke Quay. This was quickly followed by a joint venture with an established partner from Thailand, when they developed a Thai fine dining brand called Pattara. From this partnership sprang several other brands in the group’s Thai division over the years, such as Bangkok Jam and Siam Kitchen.

Today, the group boasts an impressive array of different brands and cuisines under its belt, ranging from Thai, Western, Japanese to Taiwanese. To date, it has 30 outlets in Singapore, and 11 other outlets in Malaysia, Taiwan and China. Younger sister Bonnie explains: “We put a lot of emphasis on journeying together with the consumer market in Singapore. It might start off with an inspiration, but now that Singapore is pretty saturated with all kinds of F&B cuisines, we go a lot on our understanding of the taste preferences of Singapore and the knowledge of the traffic.”

JOINING THE BUSINESS

While much of the groundwork was laid out by their father, both Bernadette and Bonnie have also come into their own over the past few years. Bernadette joined the business in 2011, while Bonnie joined two years later. As a result of their dad’s influence, the two sisters always had a vague

interest in the running of a business. But surprisingly, joining their dad was something that they both never seriously considered.

After graduation, Bernadette worked in corporate affairs in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs for two years. During that time, she would often compare and marvel at the differences between her workplace – which to her seemed like a little utopia – and what Mr Wong would tell her about his business.

In the end, the lure of experiencing it first-hand became too great to resist. Shortly before she was due to decide on an overseas posting, she asked her father if there was room for her in the business. His response? “There are a million and one things to do. Sure, we can have you,” she recalls. She started off in special projects, which later evolved to become corporate affairs and HR. It comprises all the administration in the business, which include regulatory and compliance matters, as well as HR management.

Younger sister Bonnie, on the other hand, is an accountant by training. She joined Big Four consulting firm PWC as an auditor, but left after eight months as she wanted to learn how a business is run. She later joined another management consulting firm where she worked on a project in Jakarta for eight months before the project ended.

“To me, I’ve always wanted to run a business, and that was why I did accounting, auditing and management consulting so that I could get experience in decision-making on how to run a business. And so when my dad said there’s a position open, I said I would try.”



▼ **EXTENSIVE MENU**
The group’s multi-brand approach has given it a competitive advantage





The position was for a marketing manager. Her portfolio later expanded to also take on the role of finance manager since she was trained in accounts. After one-and-a-half years, she managed to recruit a finance manager and a new finance team to handle the day-to-day work.

In 2015, Bonnie went on to oversee the operations and sales side of the business as well. On top of that, she is also in the management committee of the Restaurant Association of Singapore (RAS).

ALL IN THE FAMILY

Being part of a family business is no walk in the park, but working together has made the sisters' relationship stronger. As a standard rule, in an effort to keep their lives and work separate, they generally try not to talk about work at home unless it is necessary.

Says older sister Bernadette: "We definitely see strengths and weaknesses, and if anything, it's brought us closer together in a more realistic way. It's not just warm and fuzzy. When you get through it together, the relationship is stronger because there's a level of acceptance that comes with overcoming obstacles."

Despite her initial feelings on having her own personal space, she has learnt to accept that the time they have as a family living under one roof is short, and she has come to treasure it. Younger sister Bonnie just got married and will be moving out in a few months.

Says Bernadette: "I feel very blessed that we never gave up on having that closeness these last couple of years even though we were so busy with the business."

The pair acknowledge that while disagreements are inevitable, things never escalate to become a shouting match or cold war. Bernadette also explains that sometimes there are conflicts – not for the sake of being right, but to fight for their staff. She explains: "For

example, if sales break SOPs (standard operating procedures), then the administrative support staff will be confused and wondering to what end they will be forced to do last-minute work. So we'll come in to defend each other's positions – that's what good supervisors must do."

They also dismiss suggestions of sibling rivalry. Explains Bonnie: "People always do compare us, and they think we are the same person sometimes. But I think at the end of the day, it doesn't really matter. It's how we function as a family and move the business forward in the right direction that matters."

GOING FORWARD

While the group faces the perennial problem of lack of manpower, the pair acknowledge that people are the "bread and butter" of their business. Says Bonnie: "It would be surprising to people that the success of a restaurant is based on its restaurant manager, assuming that the food is good and consistent. A restaurant can be making losses for months, but when we change the restaurant manager, it is suddenly profitable. And we see this time and time again."

To retain good staff, the group promotes from within to reward high-performing employees who have carried on and progressed with them.

In Singapore, the growth of the F&B market has slowed so the sisters currently plan to maintain their pie and grow cautiously. The group's two most recent brands were launched last year, after a three-year break from opening more brands. They are Talay Thai, a Thai tapas bar in Clarke Quay; and Kuro Izakaya, a Japanese grill and sake restaurant in Suntec City.

The pair believe that the group's multi-brand approach has given it a competitive advantage. Bonnie, from her experience in the RAS committee, observes that it is extremely hard to grow here with just one or two brands as there

are only so many stores that this can open. But a multi-brand group is able to take a bigger unit and slice it into two outlets, or have two different brands in one mall. This increases labour efficiency as the same manager can oversee them.

Says Bonnie: "As some of our brands die, we have to continue to replace them because the market likes something fresh. They like brands to reinvent themselves. So in order for us to grow in the market, we revamp our menus every year, have concept changes every few years and add new brands."

While such a strategy was seen as negative in the past, it is now considered a "feather in the cap" as it gives the group more options to choose from when it enters into a mall or even in its overseas expansion. Currently, international revenue makes up about 17.5 per cent of the group's business.

Says Bernadette: "It's really credit to our father for taking those initial steps forward. Now with hindsight, we see the beauty of trying your luck because some of that had turned out to be the basis of our overseas expansion which has contributed quite significantly to our revenue."

The group hopes to achieve growth through overseas ventures, and has made a committed effort to do so by starting a franchising department as well as forging new partnerships and opening stores in Taiwan and Malaysia.

The team at Creative Eateries is also focused on ongoing research and development (R&D) projects, such as centralising sauce production in its central kitchen. The central kitchen is a new development that was started only in 2016, handling catering and central kitchen support.

Regardless of their endeavours, the pair is relentlessly working to take their business to the next level, even if they cannot say for certain where the road will take them eventually.

Says Bonnie: "We travel at least three to four times a year to get inspired. When we come back, even if we don't create a new concept, it's either about creating a new menu or making branding changes or just adjusting how we lay out our posters. There are always things that we are working on. When I walk into a mall, I am always looking at what other people are doing to make sure we are never one step behind." ■

MANAGING STAFF

The sisters say that the people are the bread and butter of their business



PHOTO: YEN MENG JIN