

BY VIVIEN SHIAO

CARVING A NICHE

Huber's Butchery is a family business that remains rooted to its values of making meat products the traditional way, while readying for the future by boosting process productivity and preparing to export

IT WAS 2007, and a pair of young brothers Andre and Ryan Huber had just started their fledgling butchery business with a dream to introduce European-styled premium meat products to Singapore. Later joined by their father Ernst Huber, who was a trained butcher in his native Switzerland and also a former chef, the trio had big plans to grow the company.

But the early days of Huber's Butchery was anything but smooth sailing. Barely a year after it started, it became embroiled in a long-drawn court case that eventually lasted till 2014, involving a messy split from a previous butchery business where Mr Ernst Huber was formerly a shareholder.

"It was painful times in the six years because we could not borrow any money from the bank," recalls younger son Andre Huber, executive director of Huber's Butchery. "I could not even get a credit card or a bank loan. But we learnt how to be frugal and how to expand within our means."

This was a lesson that they never forgot. When the case was concluded and banks were knocking on their doors to offer loans, the business was so financially stable that it did not need them.

Since then, Huber's Butchery has put the past firmly behind them and has only grown stronger since its tumultuous start. It is now known as the go-to place by serious meat aficionados across the island. Mr Huber shares how the family business remains rooted to its values of making meat products the "traditional way", even as it gears itself up for the future by boosting process productivity and preparing to export overseas.

FRESH MEAT

The butchery business began in 2007 when the brothers saw a gap in the market for quality meat products and service. "When you go to the supermarket, the person at the counter can't even tell you if the beef is grass-fed or grain-fed, and how to cook it," recalls Mr Huber.

Determined to address this, Huber's Butchery was created – not only to provide world-class meat products, but also to provide outstanding service by advising customers on what they are buying, where the meat comes from, and how to cook it, he says. He adds: "Of course, when you bring in quality products, they can never be cheap. But they can be value for money."

The business first operated a meat counter at NTUC Fairprice Finest in Bukit Timah Plaza, but the experience was not quite as "fine" as the brothers had hoped that it would be. "Some would get *wagyu* beef, walk around half the NTUC and then toss it into the bread section, and we had to bear the cost of it," says Mr Huber.

This led the brothers to decide to open its first retail store at Goh & Goh Building next to Beauty World, followed by another at Tanglin Post Office. But after running into issues with the location at Tanglin Post Office, they decided to pull out of there.

"It was a blessing in disguise – I searched around my network of chefs, and found an organic store in 18 Dempsey Road that was giving up the premises, and negotiated to take over the space," says Mr Huber.

Huber's Butchery opened in Dempsey in 2010, and the business grew quickly. It did so well that it decided to give up its space at Goh & Goh Building to focus on its current business.

As business boomed, the area that it needed continued to expand. In 2010, it occupied 18A Dempsey – a space of about 2,000 square feet. Later, it took over 18B Dempsey as well, doubling the space to about 4,000 square feet.

But after its lease was up, the Hubers decided to bid for 22 Dempsey Road – its current premises – where they moved to in 2016. It was a whopping 13,100 square feet, more than thrice its previous space.

"Even though we took on a space three times bigger, we were confident that it was not a big shift for the customers. It was just about 100 metres down the road, and we could offer a lot more products which we always wanted to but couldn't because we were running out of space in the previous location," he explains.



MEATING UP
Huber's Butchery is now known as the go-to place by serious meat aficionados across Singapore



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More significantly, the new space allows the Hubers to offer a bistro to accompany the retail store where customers can have a leisurely meal or coffee.

Take a walk around the sprawling outdoor space of Huber's Butchery at Dempsey Hill, and one can almost mistake it for a setting in Europe or Australia. With lush greenery dotted by fish ponds and herb gardens, it is clear that the business has spared no expense to maintain a tranquil environment for its customers to relax and enjoy.

"We built a playground as well because my brother and I have young families. We were always struggling to think of where to go for a coffee and the kids can play," says Mr Huber. "Now, parents know us because of the playground – they love bringing their kids here."

Aside from the outdoor area, the retail store was similarly conceived with much thought – it even won design awards. It does not have the typical feel of a supermarket as the Hubers wanted to create a more homely yet premium feel. For example, the two-storey retail space even invested in an escalator for customers – a rarity for stores in that area.

While the retail store is generally what customers would know about Huber's, it is only part of the business. The other half of Huber's revenue comes from its wholesale business, where it supplies meat products to about 1,000 restaurants and hotels in Singapore.

Its factory and office in Pandan Loop is where meat products are manufactured, including those that are imported and value-added in terms of portion control and marinating, Mr Huber explains.

MEAT THE HUBERS

With so many areas in the business to take care of, it is a good thing that the work can be split among the three family members. The younger Mr Huber takes care of the marketing, sales, procurement, administrative functions of the business, while older brother Ryan – the managing director – looks after logistics, production, operations and human resources. Their father takes care of the retail shop on a more operational level.

When asked how the trio work together, their dad Ernst pipes up with a chuckle that they work separately. "On a day to day basis, we don't work together. Each of us has our own areas to take care of. It works well this way, otherwise you will argue all the time," he explains.

But when a company-wide decision is needed and the two brothers cannot agree, Mr Andre Huber says, his older brother will have the final say. "He is the managing director, after all. If not, you can argue until the cows come home and nothing gets done."

He adds that it ultimately boils down to trust: "If we don't trust each other, then we will start to step on each other's tails . . . Of course we have our fair share of agreements, but at the end of the day, common sense prevails. We always look at things logically and try not to get emotions involved in this."

While it was their father who sparked their passion in meats

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– Andre Huber, executive director, Huber's Butchery

and continue to contribute to the business, he has told his sons that the company belongs to them, not him. The two brothers are 50-50 shareholders of the company. “His philosophy behind this was that he wanted my brother and I to own the business, and not feel like we are working for our dad,” explains the younger Mr Huber.

“If it’s my brother and I owning the business, we are actually responsible for the livelihood of the employees. We feel this greater need to put in extra effort to make sure the business is successful.”

As a family business, Mr Ernst Huber says, the company abides by family values. “We never have a discussion at the end of the year about making more money, which the big corporations do,” he explains. “We talk about how we can improve the quality and service for our customers – these are the main issues of the business, not about money.”

And while the retail store places a great deal of emphasis on having a personal touch, the company is trying to digitalise to increase productivity. Mr Andre Huber says: “We use machinery and software to help in efficiency and the accuracy of our business. Of course, it’s not so easy to do so in the shop because it’s about service. But in the factory, we can focus a lot more on productivity.”

Some small ways in which the company has invested in productivity includes software that tracks deliveries to improve efficiency and accountability, as well as a printer that allows invoices to be documented as soft copy so that nothing will get lost.

It is also not the only way that the business is trying to modernise – Huber’s Butchery is also ramping up its online marketing for online deliveries. Its website was launched last year, complete with videos and recipes. Its YouTube channel – which has about 12,000 followers – teaches viewers how to cook a steak, sharpen knives or to debone a chicken.

Huber’s Butchery also has a presence on social media, and is active on platforms such as Facebook and Instagram so as to attract more customers and build a community.

THE HEAT IS ON

Currently, online sales make up about 5 per cent of sales but Mr Huber says that there is a lot more potential to grow in this area. However, he notes, growth is limited by capacity issues. For example, while he would like to expand the online delivery business, the company has only two trucks for home deliveries from online sales.

As each truck can only handle up to 25 deliveries a day, the company will have to invest in more trucks, more drivers, more space, and more manpower to prepare the items, he explains.

The company is also looking to export its products overseas to neighbouring countries, but again, it is limited by capacity. “As it is now, the factory is already bursting at the seams,” Mr Huber says. “We are running two shifts just to cope with demand, and we know we can’t continue functioning like this.”

Huber’s next big project now is to look for a much bigger factory in Singapore in order to take the business to a new level. It is currently in the process of searching for a space that will allow it to ramp up production as well as to provide more services such as a show kitchen for demonstrations.

“With the new factory, we plan to export to mostly non-halal countries regionally such as Thailand, Vietnam, Myanmar, Japan, China and Hong Kong,” he says.

When asked if there were any plans to move production overseas, the Hubers give a firm no. This is a question often posed to them because of the much cheaper manufacturing costs abroad. But as the two brothers have young families, Mr Huber



PHOTOS: KELVIN CHNG



ALL IN ONE
Huber’s Butchery doesn’t just sell meat products, but also provides advice on how to cook it

says, it was not an option that they planned to look into as it would require them to spend a lot of time overseas.

“So, we decided on Singapore – it’s going to cost more, it’s not going to be easy to find manpower, but at least here in Singapore, we can control the quality,” he explains. “Since we are trying to sell very good quality products, we can afford to charge a slightly higher price.”

Also, another big reason why they chose to stay in Singapore is because of the Singapore brand. The label of where the meat products come from means a lot to many countries, he explains.

Despite the challenges that have beset them, the trio are still optimistic about their prospects – even in a fickle, saturated market like Singapore. Mr Ernst Huber adds: “It boils down to three things: quality, service and value for money. If you have these three things, you’re in business. If you don’t have one, you have a problem. If you don’t have two of them, close your business. It’s quite simple, but a lot of people don’t understand this – that is why you see so many opening and then closing six months later.”

Mr Andre Huber adds that the business is still managing to claw business from competitors, thanks to their insistence on the three values. It is not “rocket science”, but about maintaining standards, he says. “We are not trying to be the biggest meat company in the world – we just want to be the best.” ■