

PHOTOGRAPHY: CHING/CAPSULE PRODUCTIONS STYLING: DOLPHIN YEO HAIR: KEN ZHANG, FROM STARLIST BY MONSOON MAKEUP: KEITH BRYANT LEE, USING CHANEL WARDROBE: ARMANI COLLEZIONI



FINE FOODS

Indoguna is a trailblazer in the food industry, being able to source widely, manufacture *halal* and Asian products, produce a range of air-dried items and remain committed to natural, organic products **BY MINDY TAN**

SEA cucumber intestines, lamb tongue and the private parts of a cow. These are some of the quirky requests that food supplier Indoguna has received – and indeed delivered – in its two decades of operations in Singapore. “For the Singapore national team cooking at the Bocuse d’Or . . . they needed to look for sea grapes, and these things are very special. We said yeah, no problem, we can get it organised,” says Helene Raudaschl, managing director of Indoguna. “This is the type of reliability that chefs expect. If nine out of 10 times you say ‘no, I cannot’, they won’t call you anymore.”

Ms Raudaschl credits the group’s ability to source widely to its connections. But it also boils down to her passion for the business. “In our business, you cannot say (to staff) ‘look at our product list and learn it in a few days’ . . . You might think ‘oh, the food business is very interesting’. Yes, it’s interesting, but it’s not as easy as people think because chefs want particular specifications and grading, they want to know stories of everything they buy.

“If you don’t have an interest in food, it’s very hard to learn because it is very technical. It’s not as easy as going to a restaurant and saying I’d like to have a sirloin medium rare.”

This attention to detail – even for items that she does not necessarily need at the moment – comes from years of experience.

A client catering for an F1 party for instance, once asked for empty eggshells to put food in. She recalled a German company that she had met at a trade show two years ago and was able to bring in the eggshells from them.

It is not just for quirky items that Indoguna is the go-to source. Ms Raudaschl seems particularly adept at identifying demand-supply gaps in the industry and plugging them. Indoguna currently has its eye on what it sees as a burgeoning but as yet under-supplied market – the *halal* food market.

GETTING ON THE WORLD MAP

“*Halal* products are just *halal* products. There is nothing to talk about in terms of quality, or the story behind it,” says Ms Raudaschl matter-of-factly.

At its upcoming manufacturing plant in Dubai, the food supplier intends to manufacture *halal* charcuterie and a range of Asian products such as *dimsum* to target the Middle East and Europe. Construction of the plant is almost complete, and Indoguna is moving its machines in by September. It aims to kick-start commercial production in November.

“We are very keen to do Asian products

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“IF I EMPLOY A PRICE-POINT-FIRST PHILOSOPHY, THEN TOMORROW THERE WILL BE SOMEBODY CHEAPER THAN YOU. SO WE’VE NEVER CHANGED THAT PHILOSOPHY. FROM DAY ONE, IT’S ALWAYS BEEN QUALITY FIRST AND THEN EVERYTHING ELSE LATER BECAUSE I BELIEVE QUALITY BRINGS BACK CUSTOMERS AND NOT THE PRICE.”

– Helene Raudaschl, managing director of Indoguna

because we’ve worked in Dubai and the Middle East for the last eight years with Asian chefs who do *dimsum* every day, fresh . . . and business has been improving to a point where we believe there’s a really strong demand for good quality, Asian, *halal*-made products.”

At the moment, Indoguna exports a range of Asian products including *satay*, curry puffs, pineapple cakes, tarts and *dimsum* to hotels. It is expected that the plant in Dubai will duplicate these items and more when it is operational.

“In the Middle East, we see a major increase in consciousness of quality now. Prior to that, the hotels were beautiful but the quality of the food was very low. Now, it’s increasing,” says Ms Raudaschl. “Ultimately, our vision is that in five years’ time, our business will not just supply domestically in Singapore. We want to supply internationally to countries like Europe, America and back to Asia.”

BORN INTO FOOD

The high standards that Ms Raudaschl sets for herself and the team at Indoguna stem from the unique circumstances that she herself was born into. Her mother, founder of gourmet food supply company, Lordly – today one of Hong Kong’s top food distributors – exposed her two daughters to the industry early.

“We got into the business from a very young age with my mother. When she travelled, she would take us with her and we would get to see a lot of things – what’s happening in the world and in the hotels. At the time, gourmet food was supplied mainly to the hotels,” recalls Ms Raudaschl.

“So at a very young age, we were exposed to gourmet food – cheeses, seafood and different fruits – because of my mother’s business.”

She was also groomed by her “godfather” who was one of the pioneers in Hong Kong to import Australian and European products such as cheeses, caviar and berries – products which were very exotic in the 1980s.

“When I came to Singapore in the mid 1990s, the market was extremely different from Hong Kong. At the time, the Hong Kong market was booming. Hong Kong people would spend their money on food and

eating well. Here, people wanted to spend their money on their condos and their cars. Not that they didn’t want to eat well, but they would not want to spend as much money on a restaurant bill.”

It was not until the integrated resorts arrived in Singapore and there was a concerted effort to support more gourmet food events that the food and beverage (F&B) scene started to turn around. “That’s what changed the dining landscape in Singapore. We can tell people are after quality products (now). Price is always a talking point, but it’s not as important as in the mid-1990s where it was price first and everything else comes after.”

Despite the difficulties of operating in that environment, Indoguna’s business philosophy has always been quality first, says Ms Raudaschl. “If I employ a price-point-first philosophy, then tomorrow there will be somebody cheaper than you. So we’ve never changed that philosophy. From day one, it’s always been quality first and then everything else later because I believe quality brings back customers and not the price.”

A CUT ABOVE THE REST

Today, Indoguna continues to be a trailblazer in the industry, and is one of the first to produce a range of air-dried products such as black forest ham, air-dried beef and salami, thanks to an on-site air-drying chamber.

“In the beginning, we had trial runs and tests where we made a couple of hundred kilos of meat and we had to throw them all away because they didn’t match what we expected,” shares Ms Raudaschl. “Air-dried products require patience – you make, wait, taste, no good, do again, wait again. It’s a long process so you do need good people behind it.”

The process, while bumpy, has been worth it as the items that can currently be imported are very limited due to the Agri-Food & Veterinary Authority of Singapore’s (AVA) strict regulations. “With the plant, we can extensively supply products which are unique to us because no other factory in Singapore produces this kind of products,” says Ms Raudaschl.

“We’ve been doing this for close to a year now, and we have been able to produce a good selection of products which fits the palette of the local restaurants and hotels.”



Perhaps what is most unique about Indoguna’s offering is the company’s commitment to produce preservative and filler-free products, as evidenced in their in-house processed meats which are marketed under the Carne Meats label.

“Our sausages are 100 per cent meat. Our chicken hot dog is 100 per cent chicken . . . Of course, you have to spend more but I think people are willing to spend more eating better because ultimately, it’s about what you put in your body,” says Ms Raudaschl.

This commitment to natural products means that most of Indoguna’s products have a relatively shorter shelf life compared with its competitors. The shelf life of most products is between seven days and 180 days for air-dried items.

“For example, our breakfast chipolatas have 18 days’ shelf life. It’s not long – if you go to a supermarket, you can easily buy a packet of

chipolatas with a shelf life of 45 days. It is impossible to get 45 days’ shelf life if you don’t add preservatives. But we don’t want that. We are producing six days a week and we are in town delivering six days a week, twice a day.”

For restaurants that require products with a longer shelf life, Indoguna offers a frozen variety. “We use a nitrogen blast freezer at -40 degrees Celsius. Freezing the products without preservatives, we have a shelf life of 60 to 75 days. They can then defrost and use it the next day,” says Ms Raudaschl.

“In fact, when we did the blind testing between the frozen and chilled product, even the chefs couldn’t tell the difference. The freezing technology is now so advanced, if you freeze a sausage, it may take half a day because it’s a slow freezing process and crystallisation occurs. Our sausages are frozen within 15 minutes, so there’s no crystallisation and the quality is the same.”

Ever upping the ante, Indoguna is launching a range of nitrate-free charcuterie products later this year. At the moment, they have about 40 types of sausages without nitrates.

“We have always been doing natural products but now we’re officially launching our range of natural products,” says Ms Raudaschl. “No preservatives, no hormones, no antibiotics. We are also launching a line of organic turkey this Christmas.”

The food supplier introduced a range of sustainable seafood products about 18 months ago. “It’s a hard business because people need to understand why they

have to pay more for natural products rather than those grown with hormones. So it’s a long process, but we have to try because we believe in it.”

HANDLING THE “DIRTY” WORK

Indoguna also strives to become indispensable to customers by being a one-stop hub, catering a range of poultry, red meat, seafood and fish. In addition, the meats are portioned according to customers’ needs, and in some cases, marinated. In 2012, it installed a cooking line which enabled it to scale higher up the value chain and pre-cook products.

Last year, for instance, a restaurant was required to cook 80 turkeys for a Christmas party. The conundrum was that its oven could roast only four turkeys at a time. “So what we did was to roast all the turkeys for them, three-quarters done, and they just finished it off. This reduced their cooking time,” says Ms Raudaschl.

“It’s not that we have more staff, but because of economies of scale, we buy bigger-sized machines. For example, we can marinate 400 kg of turkey (equivalent to about 67 turkeys) at a time. How do you do that at a restaurant? A turkey needs a minimum of 24 hours if you use the traditional way of making the sauce, the spice, marinating and soaking of the turkey. So imagine you have to marinate 80 turkeys in your fridge. Where are you going to put them?

“That’s the challenge now. People have the business, but they don’t have the manpower to do it.”

And that is where Indoguna has established its niche.

In the meantime, it’s back to the drawing board for Indoguna, or the kitchen as the case may be, where new concepts and new products are brewing. ■

