

NOURISHING THE BODY INSIDE OUT

From organic food to reflexology, businesses in Singapore are targeting the health and wellness sector as Singaporeans give more thought to healthy eating and living.



PHOTO: STOCKPHOTO

ORGANIC GROWTH



PHOTOS: YEN MENG JIN

YOU are what you eat – or at least that is what husband-and-wife team Kelvin Chua and Huang Pei Shan, co-founders of organic food store Taste Original, believe.

It was after a health scare almost two decades ago when Ms Huang was diagnosed with cancer that led the couple to start doing their own research on clean eating. Their efforts to aid her recovery and improve her health was the start of their journey with organic food and products.

But at that time, there was little education about organic products and they were considered a rarity in Singapore. Mr Chua recalls: “It was very troublesome – in one week, we had to go to five different stores to get different organic products. And it was also very expensive.”

The experience got him thinking if there was a more affordable and convenient way for shoppers to get their hands on organic food. Mr Chua, a process engineer at the time, decided to go to Taiwan to do research by talking to local farms. He also spoke to people in Singapore who were knowledgeable about the business.

“One of the farm owners in Singapore actually advised me to stick to my job, saying that it’s not easy to start an organic business here,” he laughs. But Mr Chua

was adamant about his goal to change mindsets here about organic food – that it was not just for the wealthy, but for everyone to try.

As a result, Taste Original was born with its mission to bring organic food to the masses. It has been operating out of its shop at HarbourFront Centre for the past 10 years.

About half of the products in the store come from Taiwan – where Ms Huang is from – while the other half is sourced from Europe. The bestsellers, Mr Chua says, are the sauces and juices.

Till today, up to 90 per cent of Mr Chua’s diet consists of organic food, and he quips that Ms Huang’s diet is even stricter. In fact, Mr Chua could even be the poster boy for the company. Before his change in diet in 2000, he weighed over 100 kg, and suffered from health issues such as high blood pressure. Now, at the age of 48, not only has he lost all the excess weight, he can also pass off as a man one decade younger.

In fact, he jokes that when he attends his annual school reunions these days, he appears to be in the best shape. And this has not gone unnoticed by his friends.

“A lot of my classmates now try eating organic food. Now, when their family members fall sick, they

sometimes call me for advice on the type of food to eat. If I don’t know, I will do some research and try to help.”

It is this personalised service that is offered to their customers that differentiates the store from many of the megamarts out there, says Mr Chua. He adds that their willingness to go the extra mile for their customers has earned them a regular following, many of whom have referred others to the shop. Quite a few are also previous cancer patients who wanted to make a lifestyle change, he reveals.

“Sometimes, customers are very lost, especially when they are faced with family members who are ill. We put ourselves in their shoes, listen to them and give them advice,” he says.

To cater to the needs of their customers, they even conduct occasional cooking classes so that customers understand the best way to use their products. As a result, the company has been growing at a rate of 10-15 per cent in the past few years, with customers from all over the world such as Malaysia, China and Australia.

But this is not something that Mr Chua takes for granted. With new competitors such as e-commerce retailers and big supermarket players wanting a slice of the pie, the company cannot afford to adopt a wait-and-see approach.

The company has been selling its products on the e-commerce platform Qoo10 for the past two years. In addition, it is in the process of revamping its own website to allow customers better access to its product list.

As organic food continues to gain more popularity in Singapore, Mr Chua has observed several new trends. The first is that parents are now looking for organic baby food more than ever before. The second is that more customers are looking for gluten-free items. As a store that prides itself on being in sync with their customers, it has rapidly increased the array of such products.

Mr Chua says: “Our customers may be niche, but we still take care of them. This group of customers tell us they cannot find a lot of items, so sometimes they ask us to source for them. When I go overseas for trade shows, I will go look for them.”

With their years of expertise, they are taking things one step further by working with a manufacturer to produce organic baby food. Mr Chua explains that baby food is not easy to manufacture as there are many ingredients that they need to take note of. But he is confident that with their expertise, they would be able to come up with their own brand.

However, Mr Chua is cognisant that the market in Singapore is not as large as the market in China. The company is targeting China as a possible market for its product as the country has relaxed its one-child policy. The company also has plans to franchise in China, and is currently still in talks to do so.

Mr Chua is aware of the mounting challenges in the organic food market such as increased competition, but takes it in his stride. He adds: “As more competitors enter the market, we will need to be more knowledgeable and keep ourselves a few steps ahead . . . We want everyone to have a chance to experience our products.” ■

ROAD TO WELLNESS ➤

A health scare led Kelvin Chua and Huang Pei Shan, co-founders of organic food store Taste Original, to start doing their own research on clean eating



LIFE’S SIMPLE KNEADS

TO some, it may be a luxury. Others call it a necessity. In any case, a good massage is something that most people will not turn down.

Local small and medium-sized enterprise (SME) The Reflexology Company was founded on the belief that a massage is one of “life’s simple kneads” and should be enjoyed by all. “We are in the business of providing highly-skilled massage services at affordable prices, so our customers can enjoy massages on a regular basis instead of having to save up for that one special occasion to treat oneself at an expensive spa,” explains Paloma Lam, general manager of The Reflexology Company.

In business since 2005, The Reflexology Company now has three outlets across Singapore, with its newest and largest outlet at Alexandra Retail Centre. The company was founded by a friend whose family has migrated to Canada, and the current owner Lim Mun-Hing took over the business in 2009, says Ms Lam. It was also at the same time that Ms Lam was roped in to help run the company.

The duo dived headfirst into their virgin venture despite being rookies in the field. At the time, they had been working for more than a decade in the banking and real estate industry. Ms Lam quips: “The only relevant experience we had then was that of being a long-standing ardent customer of foot reflexology and massage services.” A quality massage was, and remains, their favourite leisure activity, she adds.

In the past few years running the business, she has observed that revenue tended to move in tandem with economic cycles, as a massage is considered a luxury good and not a necessity. When the economy is doing well, business tends to do better due to higher disposable income of customers. In bad times, their “die-hard” customers still need their massages, but the sessions that they go for are shorter, such as one hour instead of three, notes Ms Lam.

In a weaker economy, however, there are also those who seek their services because they are more stressed out. On a positive note, The Reflexology Company is getting a lift from the rise of the wellness industry as more people become aware of wellness issues and seek a healthier work-life balance.

Ms Lam cites research which shows that massage can reduce stress and aid blood circulation, aid in muscle relaxation and improve quality of sleep. She also observes that people who go for massage regularly are “typically calmer and can think clearer”.

An increasing number of employers are also reaching out to collaborate with the company to arrange for staff benefits at their outlets. Ms Lam says: “In the past, massage was a very personal activity, and people go for massage only during the weekends or on their days off.”

But now, more employers approach The Reflexology Company to give discounts to their staff. Some have purchased blocks of massage sessions for their employees on a monthly basis, while others have arranged for staff events at their outlets. There are also those who buy massage vouchers for their corporate clients and staff as door gifts and lucky draw prizes for their annual dinner and dance.



PHOTO: YEN MENG JIIN

AN AFFORDABLE KNEAD
The Reflexology Company was founded on the belief that a massage is should be enjoyed by all

Despite the positive trend, Ms Lam is well aware that the firm faces stiff competition in a crowded market. According to her, the three competitive advantages that they have are: people, people and people. She explains: “The first group of people are our therapists, the second our managers, and third our customers.”

Utmost emphasis is placed on customer service to provide a “home away from home” environment for their customers. Besides providing a good experience, the company also pays close attention to the products that they use, which Ms Lam says are carefully researched and sourced from reputable, established suppliers.

Frontline staff – both therapists and managers – are also integral to creating a good experience for their customers. Ms Lam says: “Having been employees before, we understand the heartbeat of the workers and constantly work to provide the best working environment for our staff. One that is fair, safe and respectful; one that rewards staff based on their work effort and good working attitudes.”

The company is constantly on the lookout to include new massage services for their customers. For example, it has recently launched a new thermotherapy massage using a special controlled temperature-heating equipment to help warm up tired muscles, helping to improve blood circulation around the stiff muscles before massaging out the

knots and kinks.

This type of massage is said to be more comfortable for the customer, and also more effective in alleviating muscle aches. It also prevents bruises when customers ask for harder massage, she explains, adding: “We are always researching and looking for new and better massage services and related spa products for our customers.”

While many companies would list rapid expansion and greater profits as future goals, Ms Lam says that they are not interested in that. In fact, they intend to focus on why they first started, which is encapsulated in their tagline: For life’s simple kneads. Her key goals are for the business to grow at a sustainable pace, for customers to continue getting high quality massage, and for their staff to be well-cared for in a safe working environment.

Despite the uncertainties ahead, Ms Lam remains optimistic about the business. She adds: “As people say, change is the only constant thing. But we know that nothing can quite replace the comfort and warmth of tender human hands giving a firm, targeted massage to relieve tired muscles of those who have worked hard.” ■

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