

FEEDING THE PASSION

Qi Ji has an eye on using new technology and methods to prepare traditional dishes while Putien is firmly focused on authenticity and fresh, seasonal ingredients. Both are doing something right to succeed in a nation of foodies.



TRIED AND TESTED

WHILE most firms in the food and beverage (F&B) sector are adapting to keep pace with the rapid growth of technology, homegrown restaurant chain Putien believes that sticking with perennial values will set it apart from its competitors during this period of great change.

"Delivering innovative dishes while matching local diners' tastes is the challenge that we have been facing since day one," says Jayden Xiao, general manager of Putien. "Providing foreign cuisine has been our selling point, but whether customers accept the taste is a risk as well. Fortunately, our principle of choosing only the freshest ingredients and cooking in the most authentic Putien taste differentiates us from the market."

Putien's unofficial slogan is "fresh ingredients",

says Mr Xiao. "We strongly believe that the most fundamental factor in a good dish is its freshness. Sometimes it does not make a profit for us, but we believe it helps us to build our brand."

The restaurant chain uses seasonal ingredients throughout the year to attract customers. For instance, its yearly First Harvest Seaweed menu features the first batch of the annual harvest of fully grown seaweed from Wheat Island, 50 km from the city of Putian in Fujian Province.

Adhering to its principles of freshness and authenticity helped Putien tide through the severe acute respiratory syndrome (Sars) period in 2003, which Mr Xiao says was the most difficult time for the restaurant.

Besides staying loyal to its timeless principles,



Putien has constantly refreshed its operations in accordance to industry standards. In early 2010, its founder Fong Chi Chung spent about S\$10,000 on each Putien outlet in Singapore to implement the 5S, a structured programme introduced by the Restaurant Association of Singapore (RAS). The 5S system, which is still in place at Putien outlets today, is designed to systematically achieve cleanliness and standardisation in a workplace in order to drive productivity. It refers to: sort, systemise, sanitise, standardise and self-discipline. As a result, operational efficiency at the restaurants has received a boost, using concepts such as visual cues, space management and work allocation.

Putien started in 1987, when Mr Fong ventured out of his hometown of Putian, a small agricultural coastal village in China, and arrived in Singapore. He established Putien in October 2000 as a small coffee shop on Kitchener Road, operating with seven staff. For the first few years, Putien sustained losses. But Mr Fong clung to his goal of providing authentic Fujian cuisine.

"Japanese and Western cuisine were popular back then," says Mr Xiao. "However, the macro market environment made us unique. With our heartfelt culinary offerings, our food was well accepted and complimented by the market."

For the first seven years, Putien's focus was heavy on brand positioning and building. "The precise brand positioning (authentic Fujian cuisine) gave us a clear direction to move towards. This principle had been applied throughout our operation, from R&D and marketing, to in-store activities," says Mr Xiao.

In 2006, Putien opened its second outlet at Mapletree mall VivoCity. The same year, it was voted as one of Singapore's Top 50 Restaurants by *The Sunday Times* and also moved beyond Singapore's shores to open its first overseas restaurant in central Jakarta. Today, Putien has more than 30 outlets across Malaysia, Indonesia, Hong Kong, Shanghai, Taiwan and Guangzhou. It has 10 outlets in Singapore.

"It has been a 150 per cent growth per annum in terms of the number of outlets, and a 60 per cent increase per annum in terms of gross

BACK TO HIS ROOTS

Mr Fong hopes to take Putien to other major Chinese cities, as well as Japan, South Korea, the Middle East and Europe



profit between 2014 and 2016," says Mr Xiao. "2016 was the most glorious year for Putien. Our Causeway Bay outlet in Hong Kong

was recommended by Michelin Guide Hong Kong and Macau, and our Kitchener Road outlet in Singapore was crowned as a Michelin one-star restaurant."

Mr Fong told IE Singapore last year that he hopes to take Putien to other major Chinese cities, as well as Japan, South Korea, the Middle East and Europe. "But such expansion will still retain Singapore as the centre of learning, management and brand value because this is the country of origin for the Putien brand," says Mr Xiao.

He reveals that cultural difference is the biggest challenge that lies ahead for the restaurant chain. "It affects not only the extent of food taste, but also marketing strategy, brand positioning and even daily operations," he explains. "Our global HQ plays a key role to set our vision and core values, and allows each region to have its own creative operation to bring the best to the respective market."

More than anything, Putien is focusing on the overall customer experience. For instance, birthday celebrations for babies at their outlets involve staff singing an in-house prepared song, a birthday gift as well as photo-taking and printing. The group has also leveraged on technology to boost productivity in stock replenishment and automated initial food preparation, as well as customer relationship management (CRM), online food ordering, table reservation and loyalty programmes to offer a smooth experience for customers.

That said, Putien commits attention to its own employees as well. It devotes one-third of its profits every quarter to dividends for staff. "We plan career paths for each employee so that they have a clear direction to fight for," says Mr Xiao. "Sharing the company's vision and future with them gives them the confidence to commit their future in Putien." ■



PHOTO: YEN MENG JIN

TRADITIONAL WITH A MODERN TWIST

HOME-GROWN food and beverage (F&B) brand Qi Ji prides itself on bringing local comfort food to the average Singaporean. Just don't be too surprised when you walk into one of its stores and find that the *otah* in your *nasi lemak* is coin shaped and comes sans coconut leaf.

Qi Ji's recent coin-shaped *otah* (grilled fish cake) is yet another example of innovation in an industry that is fairly traditional.

"We needed to take a different approach because the traditional approach was very difficult to automate," says Kenneth Low, senior manager (central operations and administration).

The traditional process was too manual, and required five to six staff working for half a day to supply to both retail and catering operations. This was excluding the time taken to grill the *otah*, which was done via a conveyor belt system that also had to be manned. "So the first step that we took was to trial a different shape because people are very emotional about traditional food," he says. "Surprisingly, it was very successful."

Strategy officer and Qi Ji co-founder Leith Neo explains that instead of having workers manually wash, dry and open up coconut leaves to fill them with *otah* paste, workers can now simply load the paste into a big drum in the central kitchen and to have it moulded into a consistent coin shape. It is then transferred into a combination oven to cook. "We found that the leaves might pose hygiene issues, and it doesn't add much value to the taste too, so we got rid of it," says Mr Neo. Qi Ji had tailor-made machines to make the automated process possible.

The local brand has come a long way since its start 18 years ago. Qi Ji has its origins as a humble family-owned business. During the 1980s and 1990s, the Lim brothers and sisters – eight uncles and aunts of Qi Ji's co-founders – operated Hock Heng Food Stall in Funan Centre, and in later years, in Shaw Gallery Food Court. They served homemade *popiah*, *laksa*, *mee siam* and *nasi lemak*. Hock Heng's *popiah* became a hit with the customers, with up to 500 to 600 rolls sold daily.

"But retail in food courts is not very scalable," says Mr Neo. "There is also a danger where you can only sell certain products because the operator will impose restrictions. And if the operator loses the food court, the entire place has to be shut down. Overseas cuisines can be scalable and can go far – why can't our local cuisines do the same?"

So with the blessings of the Lim siblings to use their recipes, Mr Neo co-founded Qi Ji in December 1999 with his brother-in-law Alan Lau, now director (central operations & catering), and his uncle, one of the Lim siblings.

Qi Ji specialises in retail, catering and business-to-business supply of *popiah* ingredients. At the core of its business is its central kitchen. "During our startup period, the concept of a central kitchen was relatively new in Singapore compared to other more developed markets," recalls Mr Neo. "Having a central kitchen also means that it is a cost centre that requires



multiple revenue streams to support it.”

But Qi Ji founders had also observed that cities such as Hong Kong were getting densely populated, with shops getting smaller, adds Mr Neo. They had reckoned that Singapore would soon face a similar issue, making it unsustainable to put a big kitchen in every retail outlet.

Today, Qi Ji has more than 200 staff operating its central kitchen, catering unit and its 14 retail outlets, serving an estimated 30,000 regular customers in Singapore. Food technology has been a prominent feature of the central kitchen since its inception. “For instance, the traditional way of making *popiah* (Fujian spring roll) skin requires the dough to be handmade. But we broke down the *popiah*-making process into smaller processes and asked ourselves: Can machines replace manual work at any of these stages?” says Mr Neo.

Qi Ji also moved away from transporting large loads of gravy to its retail outlets; instead, concentrates are whipped up in the central kitchen, then reconstituted (addition of water) in the stores. “We’re constantly on the lookout for suitable tech,” says Mr Low, adding that a team is tasked with evaluating manufacturing processes and customer feedback. The company also

constantly seeks direction from industry experts through Spring Singapore.

Five years ago, Qi Ji significantly expanded its central kitchen, housed along with its head office and catering unit in a Mapletree flatted factory at Kampong Ampat. Mr Neo estimates that more than S\$2 million has been invested into automation, including machinery upgrades and construction expenses.

The company is gradually moving into the digital sphere as well. Besides currently allowing customers to order and pay for catering online, Qi Ji is in talks with vendors to develop a mobile application that will let customers to order and pick their food up from its retail stores.

And Qi Ji is determined that its local delights please more than just Singaporeans. “Singapore has a very strong international brand. But if you look at local food representing Singapore internationally, there aren’t many,” says Mr Low. “I think there is an

opportunity for us to represent Singapore on an international level through local cuisine.”

“We are *halal* certified, so that opens up more options for us,” adds Mr Neo. The company aims to expand in South-east Asian cities for a start, propelled by automation and delivering consistency in food quality. ■

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◀ HOMEGROWN
Qi Ji started as a family business, and is now run by (from left) director Alan Lau, deputy director Lee Kim Guan, financial controller Jerry Tan, senior manager Kenneth Low, strategy officer Leith Neo