



Springing to healthy food in S'pore



Debbie Yong | The Business Times | Thu Dec 6 2012



Photo: Smoothie King

There is a changing appetite for healthy food in Singapore and challenges that lie ahead for health food restaurants.

Singapore, December 6, 2012

Eating healthy has never been more critical. According to statistics shared at the inaugural Worlds of Healthy Flavours Asia conference held in Singapore last week, if our nation's eating habits remain unchanged, half a million people in Singapore are expected to have diabetes by 2020.

Among this, 200,000 working adults - or 13 per cent of the nation's workforce - will be affected.

Pair this with the growing rate of obesity in Singapore (now at 11 per cent) and our increasing propensity to eat out (60 per cent of Singaporeans eat out four times or more weekly, up from 49 per cent in 2004), and what you get is a timely call for our nation to re-examine its food consumption patterns.

But even as the advocacy for healthier food options by governmental bodies such as the Health Promotion Board grows stronger, local food providers, it seems, are still slow to take heed.

The obstinance can stem from all segments of the food provider spectrum: from the aged hawker who fears that incorporating brown rice into his decades-old chicken rice recipe may turn off loyal customers, to the labour-strapped restaurant loathe to hire one more kitchen hand to man an expanded salad station.

Chief among the obstacles in making a committed switch, most food providers say, is an unyielding perception commonly held among diners that healthier food options are often less flavourful, not as filling, and more expensive.

Then there's also the marketing tightrope to tread. While most consumers innately acknowledge that they should eat healthy, overtly branding one's cuisine as health food can sometimes become a turn-off.

Notes founder of the Cedele chain of bakery-cafes and restaurants, Yeap Cheng Guat: "Food has to be delicious first and if it's also good for you, it's a bonus."

She elaborates: "When people eat out, they want to pamper themselves. They don't want to feel like they're buying rabbit food or worse, being nagged at."

Growing hunger for health

But it's not all gloom and doom. The mid-tier independent restaurant cluster, at least, has seen a recent surge of new health-focused start-ups looking to cater to the growing pool of educated, calorie-conscious corporate executives. Salad bars, vegetarian restaurants and low-calorie smoothie counters are now becoming dime-a-dozen in the Central Business District - with many reporting positive growth rates.

Salad Stop! founder Adrien Desbaillets estimates that business has grown 15 to 30 per cent year on year since he started the business with his father in 2009. Today, Salad Stop! runs nine outlets, all in the central business district or high-visibility malls such as Takashimaya and Fusionopolis.

Likewise, Edwin Ng of Munch Saladsmith estimates that business has increased threefold since he started three years ago. He now gets an average of 250 customers daily, and plans to add 10 more outlets to his current stable over the next three years.

Mr Ng credits, in part, the proliferation of fitness businesses such as mixed martial arts gyms and yoga studios for helping to spread the word on healthy eating: "Once trainers tell their students to cut fat and carbs from their diet, the instinctive thing is to turn to salads."

Singapore's ageing population and our society's growing affluence factor in too, reckons Adeline Tan, founder of smoothie store and online delivery business, Lins Smoodees. "More people end up becoming caregivers themselves and hence become more conscious about the prevention of illnesses," she says.

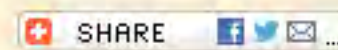
The availability of movies focused on health food such as Food Matters, Food Inc, and Fork over Knives help to make it a more mainstream topic, adds Veganburg's Katrina Lugartos.

The Living Cafe's Dana Heather, a natural health practitioner, has noticed a recent mindset shift among Singaporeans who are now starting to perceive good health as a preventive measure against diseases, rather than something sought only after one has taken ill.

"Even if they are not vegetarian, people are realising that adding more fresh, organic and vegetarian options to their diet is beneficial to their health," says Marisa Bertocchi, co-owner of 15-year-old Original Sin, the first Western restaurant to offer vegetarian food in a smart-dining environment. While the restaurant was patronised by a handful of local and expat vegetarians in its early days, around 80 per cent of its diners today are non-vegetarians, she adds.

And it's not just individuals craving better food, their employers are plugging in too. Salad Stop!'s Mr Desbaillets says that he has gotten several requests from companies to help design their cafeterias and stock their pantries with his brand of salads and sandwiches. Requests for catered salads for corporate events are increasingly common too - a demand Mr Desbaillets hopes a soon-to-launch mobile food service will meet.

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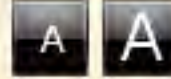
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Against all odds in the healthy food business



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Photo: ST

Why do these businesses still press on, despite naysayers harping on about the niche market of healthy eaters in Singapore?

Singapore, December 6, 2012

But why do these businesses still press on, despite naysayers harping on about the relatively niche market of healthy eaters in Singapore?

Falling into a pigeonhole is sometimes a matter within one's control, says Arianne Uebel. The Singapore-based private chef who recently launched online raw food service, The Rawyal Kitchen, acknowledges that "raw food can sometimes seem like a cult, because people - sometimes raw foodists themselves - get obsessed about looking at it as a distinct culture."

She explains: "But once people realise that all 'raw food' really means is adding a few fresh fruits and vegetables in your meal, then the labels come off and it becomes more acceptable."

Price, likewise, "is an obstacle of choice," states the Living Cafe's Mrs Heather. "I've met people who say they can't afford regular supplements or a fresh, healthy salad that can save them from costly medical bills down the road - and yet they have no problems spending on alcohol and cigarettes."

The issue of cost can also be driven down by tapping on economies of scale, adds Mr Desbaillets.

"For our ingredients to stay fresh, we require a high turnover rate, which is why we've stuck to mainly high-traffic locations for now," he explains.

For others, it's about accepting leaner margins while staying focused on the bigger picture, that is, building a relationship with customers based on a shared outlook on life. Veganburg, for instance, positions itself not just as a vegan burger joint, but a complete family destination, with sustainable toy swaps regularly organised for its young patrons.

Emmanuel Stroobant of the Emmanuel Stroobant Group of restaurants including Saint Pierre, Brussels Sprouts and Picotin, takes it one step further. Since September this year, the celebrity chef has been crafting non-processed, brown rice and vegetable-laden set meals for students at the Stamford American International School. Says the chef, himself a vegetarian: "I believe education is the key in this fight. We have to change people's eating habits starting from a young age."

The way forward

With the world population now doubled and food resources increasingly scarce, it is "only human to try and profit from this" says chef Stroobant, "but it takes personal mindfulness on the part of chefs to take the lead in deciding what we want for the next generation."

In other words, "if we want to keep our customers alive, we better do something about it - it's our responsibility," he states.

Other restaurant owners foresee that future challenges are not problems that pertain to health food restaurants in particular, but stumbling blocks that affects all operators in the restaurant industry, such as the current labour crunch and sky-rocketing rental rates.

Fresh+ salad bar's owner Philippe Blin cites two recent rental raises he was faced with, which hiked up his rents by more than 70 per cent. If such increases in the CBD become widespread, he surmises, "the only operational model likely to succeed is that of a suburban central kitchen that does deliveries to small points of sales in the CBD". But this model would have a significant negative impact on the freshness of the produce, he adds.

Munch Saladsmith's Mr Ng has a more positive take. Inevitable as they are, higher rentals may push entrepreneurs to sell their products at more sustainable prices, he says, and more of them may ultimately venture into food courts or HDB shops - a boon for "heartland" dwellers.

Another oft-cited fear is that the term "healthy eating" will become too trendy - or even faddish - and in turn attract profit-seeking business banking on the health food label to make a quick buck without the right intentions.

"The 'be in it to get it' attitude is going to give us a bad name," says Philip Kwek, the local master franchisee for Australian salad chain Sumo Salad. "Just offer good and delicious food, it is that simple."

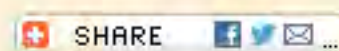
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