Springing to healthy food in S’pore

Dakke Yang | The Business Times | The Dec 6 2012

Eating healthy has never been more critical. According to statistics shared at the inaugural World’s Tastiest Data 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 31,000 working adults – or 1 percent of the nation’s workforce – who are affected by diabetes.

But in the case of healthier food options by governmental bodies such as the Health Promotion Board, green schools, local food providers, it seems, are still slow to take hold.

The distasteful I can stem from all segments of the food provider spectrum. From the ageing hawker who fears that incorporating toxins into his deteriorating children may ruin his turn off local customers. To the labour-intensive restaurant so as to hire one more kitchen hand to man an expanded order station.

Making the commitment, most food providers say, is an overwhelming responsibility. Not among any share that healthier food options are often less flavourful, not as filling, and more expensive.

There has also been a noticeable shift to health. While most consumers now acknowledge that they should eat healthy, people lament on one’s cuisine as health food can sometimes become too mouth.

But it’s not all gloom and doom. The real life independent restaurant business, at least based on a recent survey of 60 health-focused start-ups looking to cater to the growing population of health-conscious people who are looking for a healthier lifestyle.

Said Rest (pointing to a crowded spot) that business has grown 15 to 30 percent year on year since he started the business with his father in 2009. Said Rest runs nine outlets, all in the central business district and high-visible mixed with Talents and happy isolation.

Likewise, Edwin Majic of the Caledonos estimates that business has grown 80 percent over the three years. He now has an average of 200 customers daily, and plans to add 10 more outlets to his system stable over the next three years.

The availability of more focused on healthy food such as Food Matters, Food Fun, and Potlak, who has been able to make it a more mainstream topic, adds Saigon’s former Laptei.

The Living Cafe’s Sara Heath, a natural health practitioner, has noted a recent mindset shift among Singaporeans who are now starting to personal good health as a preventive measure against disease, rather than something to fight once one’s has taken hold.

“Even if they are not vegetarian, people are realizing that adding more fresh, organic and vegetables into their diet is beneficial to their health,” said Maria Farrelly, co-owner of Dr. Charsalimali, the first Western restaurant to offering vegetarian food in a smoke-free environment. While the restaurant was patronized by a handful of local and expatriate vegetarians in its early days, 50 percent of its diners today are non-vegetarians, she says.

And it’s not just individuals eating better food, their employees are changing too. Said Rest’s Rest (pointing to a crowded spot) that business has grown 80 percent over the three years. He now has an average of 200 customers daily, and plans to add 10 more outlets to his system stable over the next three years.
Against all odds in the healthy food business

Dennie Yong | The Business Times | The Dec 6 2012

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

Falling into a niche category is sometimes a matter within one's control, says Alain Labal, the Singapore-based private chef who recently launched online raw food service, The Healthy Kitchen. He acknowledges that "raw food can sometimes seem like a fad, because people - sometimes raw food enthusiasts - getデザイン about looking at it as a fad or fad/cult."

To this, Labal adds: "But once people realize that all food really means is adding a few fresh fruits and vegetables in your meal, then the labels come off and it becomes more acceptable."

Pro-Health, the now-defunct "100% organic" eatery in Tanjong Pagar, was instead driven by views held by its founders, who said they could not afford regular supplements or a fresh, health-conscious diet that can save them from costly medical bills down the road - and yet they had no problem spending on alcohol and cigarettes. The issue of cost can also be driven down by tapping on economies of scale, adds Mr Debalappu.

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

For others, it's about accepting leaner margins while staying focused on the bigger picture, that is, building a relationship with customers based on shared values, with something for all: nutrition, flexibility in menu, position itself not just as a vegan burger joint, but a complete family destination, with sustainable operations and clearly organized menu for its young audience.

Emmanuel Floobert of the Emmanuel Floobert Group of restaurants including Saint Pierre, Impastrosi and Sohn, takes the time to stay further. Since September this year, the celebrity chef has been running a non-processed, brown rice and vegetable-laden set menu for students at the Stanford American International School. Said the chef, himself a vegetarian: "I believe education is the key to 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 increasing scarce, it's "ironic human beings depend on how we plan to feed our children. It's time to plan our food carefully, take the lead in demanding our role in solving the problem of world hunger," he states.

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

Fresh salad bar owner Philip Lee sees the recent rental increase was faced with, which hiked up by 10% to more than 70%. If such increases in the CBD become widespread, he surmises, "the only operational model left is that of a chain restaurant that does not deliver to small parts of the CBD, but this model would have a significant negative impact on the freshness of the produce, he adds.

Mash Bahnam's Life Bistro has a more positive take. Inevitably so, as he says, higher rentals now will ensure he will attract more customers, diverse health-conscious, clean eating and more freedom of choice will lead him to venture into food courts or 100 shops - a boon for "exploring" dishes.

Another offshoot food that has been trending lately - raw food - is driving the trend - raw or plant-based - and in turn affect profit-seeking business looking to the health food label to make a quick buck without the right intentions.

"The aim in it all is to give up bad names," adds Philip Lee, the food-based franchise for Australian chain lovers of Sohn Salad. "Just offer good and delicious foods, right that simple."