

Golden Bridge wants to make inroads abroad

The company is targeting the Middle East region in the medium term

By LIM WEI SHENG

THE first thing that greets any visitor to Golden Bridge Foods Manufacturing Pte Ltd is the unmistakable salty aroma of cooking meat.

An aroma most are acquainted with, but one that is endearingly familiar for Ong Bee Chip, managing director of the 25-year-old meat manufacturing and supply business.

"Our company started off producing only Chinese sausages, as being Chinese, it is closest to our culture," he recounts.

Golden Bridge has surpassed its humble beginnings on many levels. From a small industrial unit, its factory space has increased by 10 times over the years, and the company is planning to expand in July 2012 in order to ramp up production capacity.

Golden Bridge has also gone beyond offering its traditional Chinese fare. It now provides a range of other products from Western hams to even halal cold cuts, all prepared in four different forms – dry, chilled, frozen, and shelf-stable.

These are then supplied to Golden Bridge's many clients, which include a range of food businesses such as hotels, supermarkets, and food service outlets.

This wide-net initiative is in line with Golden Bridge's strategy to capture as many consumer market groups as possible. This is complemented by targeted, focused branding of its products.

"For our Chinese meats, we still use the *jin qiao* (Chinese for golden bridge) label to connect with our old-time customers," Mr Ong explains. The Western

range is marketed under the Kelly's brand.

What's most distinctive, though, is Golden Bridge's halal range of sausages, cold cuts, and canned meats, which was introduced in 2009 through subsidiary company Ellaziq Pte Ltd.

"We are one of the only players in the halal sausage manufacturing niche," says Mr Ong. Besides catering to halal food consumers locally, Mr Ong sees a much larger vision for Ellaziq – to enter the Middle East market in the medium term, in addition to its current seven export destinations in Asean and Australia.

Despite the wide range of product offerings, Mr Ong has recognised the need to focus on a core product in the medium to long term.

This strategy, he notes, is entirely compatible with the necessity for efficiency and productivity to be ramped up in the firm. "One of the disadvantages of most firms in this sector is that manufacturing operations only occur around 10 hours a day. During the night, operations in the factory are at a much lower intensity and this is an inefficient use of time and machines," he says.

In Mr Ong's opinion, core product development can alleviate these shortfalls. "If we are able to focus on a single product as our main offering, we can make correspondingly larger investments into machines which can enhance manufacturing automation of this product.

"Hence, the night shift can be manned by minimal labour while labour-intensive operations can be confined to the day, for the products which are non-core."

This initiative is also likely to foster a more efficient use of manpower and ease the pressures posed by the

labour crunch in recent years.

Says Mr Ong: "It is usually harder to hire workers to do the night shift, especially when they have to work in the cold environment of the manufacturing rooms. The day-night arrangement can ensure that the factory possesses a sufficient number of workers for each time slot."

Forging frontiers in new markets is an equally significant aim for Mr Ong. "The Singapore market has always been small, but now our consumer base is experiencing further contraction with the economic downturn," he says.

Hence the need for a core product which is "exportable" to foreign markets. Mr Ong says that he was looking into a shelf-stable food range for the firm's core product, which are products that can be stored at ambient temperature for an appropriate shelf-life. "The product should ideally be ready-to-eat and easily prepared through microwave," he adds.

Such are the considerations for the transport of perishable foodstuff across geographical boundaries, which makes the growth of the export business an added challenge for a firm such as Golden Bridge. In fact, the obstacles don't only lie in the meat, but on paper as well.

"Submitting documentation for approval to supply meat is more complex than normal manufactured products," says Mr Ong, referring to the stringent requirements imposed by many countries on the import of agricultural and meat products.

"We need to submit information from our processing temperature, raw meat form, process flow, etc... I would say that if approval for a normal product requires three months, approval for meat products re-

quires six months," he says.

Still, Mr Ong acknowledges the need for regulations in maintaining hygiene and quality standards in his products, a factor which he places much emphasis on.

"One of the relative advantages of doing a meat manufacturing business in Singapore is the relative ease of access to diverse meat sources, so that in case of supply disruptions due to factors like infectious disease, other sources can be relied upon."

In fact, regulations, according to Mr Ong, are double-edged swords. "While they may serve as entry barriers to the market, they also ensure that we have less competitors who can achieve the required standards and enter the market with us," he points out.

Ultimately, the proof of the pudding is in the eating. For Mr Ong, that pudding is none other than his meat products. "We obtain constant feedback from our customers so that we can improve the seasoning and flavouring of our sausages."

The other half of the equation lies in the mechanics of the manufacturing process. As such, the company has spent a hefty US\$1.6 million on new microwave defrosting machines so that frozen meat can be defrosted and processed more quickly, streamlining the production procedure.

There is no secret ingredient to his company's success. When asked what has brought him this far, Mr Ong lists familiar qualities – the ability to be focused, to have passion for one's work, and to have a robust management ethic.

Although such qualities are age-old and traditional, but like the Chinese sausages that he started out with, they are as relevant to our lives today as they were then.



Mr Ong: 'We are one of the only players in the halal sausage manufacturing niche.'

ARTHUR LEE

Jumbo living up to its name in more ways than one

By ANNA LEE

GONE are the days when Jumbo struggled to survive, the group has since expanded to a size that makes it deserving of its name.

The group, helmed by CEO Ang Kim Meng, boasts the well-known Jumbo seafood, the newly successful Chin Huay Lim Teow Chew Cuisine, Ng Ah Sio Bak Kut Teh, JPOT, as well as Yoshimaru Ramen Bar. Jumbo group has also joined hands with fellow local seafood groups and developed Singapore Seafood Republic, that has three outlets in Japan and one in Singapore.

Only three months into its opening, Chin Huay Lim Teow Chew Cuisine sees a fully packed restaurant daily in spite of not having the most central of locations. JPOT is looking to open its third branch in the third quarter of this year, while Ng Ah Sio Bak Kut Teh will have a second outlet at Tanjong Katong.

In Japan, the Singapore Seafood Republic in Shinagawa, Tokyo, requires a reservation at least two weeks in advance to ensure a meal in the often full-house restaurant.

As the accolades pour in, the initial struggles of the camera-shy Mr Ang are now a distant memory. He came from a software engineering background and found adapting to his new field quite tough at first as "dealing with the computer and people requires very different skills".

Mr Ang's keen business sense was acquired on the job and his never-say-die attitude helped turn the failing seafood restaurant into a household name. "I had no formal business management skills or knowledge," he said.

As for his mid-life career switch, Mr Ang said: "I used to wonder whether I was doing the right thing. But perseverance is the main thing, when you go into a new chapter in life, you just have to believe that you can make it."

For him, it was a steep learning curve, having to give up his nine-to-five job, with holidays, to a "no-off, no-holidays type of lifestyle".

However, he emphasised that the business is always about people and is only as strong as its weakest link. He puts this into practice by frequently upgrading and retraining the staff, boasting of close to 30 courses both internally and externally.

These are offered to all staff, catering to their various expertise needs,



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YEN MENG JIN

ranging from language and service soft-skills courses, to their newly developed programme "LEAD", designed for senior managers.

These in-house courses have attained Approved Training Organisation (ATO) and Approved Training Centre (ATC) status, ensuring high standards and strict regulation of the courses.

It has also served as an encouragement to foreign workers, thereby boosting productivity as they feel that they are being taken care of, said Mr Ang, who is also the president of the Restaurant Association of Singapore.

This has become an imperative in recent years as staff turnover rates have been getting higher, while the service standards have been dropping, where "we have very raw serv-

ice staff (who) cannot even hold a tray or speak properly" in the industry.

These "nitty gritty details" that a lot of establishments have overlooked, is what Mr Ang feels has caused some of them to shoot themselves in the foot. "At least some basic training is important. If you want them (the staff) to do a little bit better, then you should be consistently upgrading and holding refresher courses."

This is perhaps why Jumbo group has a turnover rate that is lower than industry levels, according to Mr Ang. The group boasts a large crew of long-serving staff, with about 200 of its 800 employees having stayed for more than five years and close to 100 who have served more than 10 years.

Of late, various stakeholders have spoken about the impact of the bud-

get on SMEs. It was appropriate, then, that Mr Ang shared the productivity initiatives that Jumbo has undertaken, the main one being the development of the central kitchen.

"We noticed that while we have the formula and recipe given to our chef, the chilli crab tasted different at all the outlets even when we give them trade secrets. This resulted in wasted manpower as our head chef had to go to every outlet to standardise taste and texture... the competitive industry that we're in also demands consistency of taste across different outlets."

Their HACCP (Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Point)-certified central kitchen thus handles central purchasing, as well as standardising the food quality. The semi-processing of products also enables outlets to cut

down on their workload and increase their productivity, spending more time generating dishes rather than preparing them.

Benefits include empowering busy outlets to extend business hours "so that we can increase our business hours and our sales" and allowing for more productive work to be done as the tedious work can be completed in the central kitchen with the help of machinery. Essentially, with less people Jumbo has been able to achieve more.

While the concept of central kitchens is starting to be increasingly adopted in Singapore, Mr Ang qualified that "it's not cheap to have a central kitchen and that's why you need to have volume".

He also acknowledged that these advancements of the Jumbo group were only possible because of the gov-

ernment's strong support and "local companies are quite lucky, as even during the (economic) downturn, the government puts in a lot of grants for local businesses to tap on and train their staff".

Spring Singapore and IE Singapore have been instrumental in helping the group develop. Said Mr Ang: "They bring us out to see the best practices of the world. With that we can then innovate all these input and come up with our own concepts."

His hands-on approach is evident in the way he briefs his staff. "In the past I used to be on the floor very regularly," he said. "I got to know a lot of people and experience the celebratory mood; that's the satisfaction we have." He continues to foster a close working relationship with his colleagues, where "all of us are very cordial, like a big family".

Having celebrated the group's 25th anniversary with the Jumbo family last month, the group looks to expansion beyond Singapore's shores. Plans are afoot to expand into new frontiers such as Indonesia and China.

Negotiations are ongoing in Indonesia while in China, Mr Ang sees an increasingly viable market. "There's a market there, we may not be the mainstream, but in such a huge market we don't have to be the mainstream to make it a viable expansion," he said.

Staying true to the ethos of "bonding people through food", Jumbo has since also delved into the retail market, offering retail products of chilli crab paste, black pepper crab spice, as well as Ng Ah Sio Bak Kut Teh. An average Singaporean can now savour the tastes of these iconic foods from the comforts of home, extending the reach of Jumbo group.

This market has a "big untapped potential" which Mr Ang believes is a good direction for the company to move towards.

In spite of all of these, Mr Ang asserts that there is much room for improvement. Rating himself 5.5 out of 10 in terms of success, he feels that "there's a lot more to improve to call ourselves very successful".

"What makes us what we are today is mainly the human resource that we build up; that's our foundation. And we will constantly connect with the market, understanding the market needs and wants with an open mind, constantly revamping and reinventing ourselves to stay relevant."