



DRESSED IN A CRISP WHITE LONG-sleeved shirt and black pants, Katherine Goh looks more like the owner of a fashion boutique than the owner of a chain of nasi padang food court stalls.

The former air stewardess opened her first nasi padang stall at the Food Junction food court in Bishan Junction 8 in 1993 with an investment of \$50,000. What set Katrina Nasi Padang apart from other nasi padang stalls then was its wider variety and longer opening hours.

Many of her competitors were old *mak chiks* (middle-aged Malay ladies) who sold nasi padang for only a few hours a day. "That meant you couldn't have it for dinner. Vegetable dishes were also limited," says Katherine. "Most of my customers are Chinese, and they were looking for fried vegetable dishes so we added that."

# Food for thought

Hot, sticky and smelly – these concerns did not put ex-stewardess Katherine Goh off going into the food court business. Today, her Katrina Nasi Padang has grown into Katrina Holdings, which has a chain of food court outlets, restaurants and a catering arm

## THE UNGLAM FACTOR

Katherine was attracted to the food stall business because she heard of operators enjoying huge profits. "I found out from an outlet in Marina Square that the Hong Kong noodle stall there was able to earn \$16,000 to \$18,000 a month!" she says. So she went ahead, despite skepticism from family and friends.

"My friends asked me, 'Are you sure you want to go into this line? You will be oily and smelly, and have to work day and night,'" she recalls with a chuckle. "But I was thinking about the income. So I didn't care whether it was oily or dirty! I could solve that problem later when I made the money!"

Eleven years later, her hard work has paid off. That one stall has grown to 29 stalls selling more than just nasi padang. The original Katrina Nasi Padang has been joined by Bali Bagus, Mai Thai, Indo Thai, Always Fruitful and Yong Tau Fu. Together with a catering arm and three restaurants, two Bali Thai and one Renn Thai, these make up Katrina Holding, owned by Katherine and her husband, Alan Goh, both 45.

She takes care of daily operations while Alan handles finance, human resource and administration. Katrina Holdings has a current annual turnover of \$19 million. The company launches their second Renn Thai outlet in Clarke Quay this December, and are looking into branding and franchising Bali Thai in China, and Jakarta. A new-concept restaurant is also in the pipeline.

These successes are hard won, Katherine will tell you. She lost sleep, lost weight and sacrificed precious time with her children in the early years of her business. Yet she never gave up because she believed in her dream.

## EATING HUMBLE PIE

Before she started Katrina Nasi Padang, Katherine combined her love of food and enterprise to supply nonya kueh to food kiosks in Ang Mo Kio and Chinatown. "My sister and I made the kuehs from home; it was so tiring!" she says of her first experience in the food industry. It was this stint that gave her the confidence to manage a food stall.

No family member wanted to help her out at the stall at first. Eventually she persuaded one of her sisters to join her. She also employed two cooks with food court experience.

"I cried in the kitchen on the first day," she confesses. "It was the opening of the Bishan Junction 8 food court so the queue was non-stop. Whatever we cooked was sold out within an hour. Customers refused to go even though we told them that we didn't have any more rice. They said they would wait. I told them they had to wait 15 minutes. They stood in the queue and scolded us: 'You said 15 minutes but I'm still standing here!' My staff and I had to squat behind the stall so that the

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customers wouldn't see us. We only got up when the rice was ready."

In the first two years, Katherine lost 7 kg from working 18-hour days, seven days a week. She was at the stall from 6am and only left at midnight.

## STAFFING STRATEGIES

Staffing was, and still is the biggest



hurdle in the business especially for the foodcourts. She explains: "When we advertise an opening, people call and 'interview' us instead! Probably four will turn up for the interview and three will get confirmed. Out of this three, probably only one will turn up. Some will turn up for a day and decide not to go ahead. A lot of them don't want to work on weekends or in between the peak mealtimes."

Katherine's strategy is to overstaff, so that in the event a worker does not show up, the stall is still able to cope. However, her frustrations do not end here. After they have been hired, some workers prove to be a challenge with an I-know-you-need-me attitude. "If you reprimand them nicely for not following instructions, they can choose to not turn up the next day," she says.

### **JUGGLING THE WORK WITH FAMILY**

The punishing pace of the business in the early years took a toll on Katherine's time with her young family. She was then 34, and had two small children, Donovan, then five, and Krystal, who was barely a year old.

This was how she coped: "We spent time as a family this way. When we finished with the lunchtime crowd, my husband and I would go home, pick up the kids, and go to perhaps the zoo at 3pm. We would bring them home by 6pm. Then we would have a shower and rush back to the stall to handle the dinner crowd. Sometimes, when we came back at midnight, we would wake the kids and play with them."

As the business expanded, she employed more staff. "At every outlet we have a crew leader and supervisor. There is also an area manager who manages a few outlets and an overall operations manager." This has afforded her the luxury of keeping regular eight-hour working days nowadays.

## **HOW TO RUN A FOOD BUSINESS**

Katherine reveals the strategies that has worked for her

- **Know your customer profile** Know what they want in terms of taste and pricing. If you are running a restaurant, think about the dining experience.
- **Do your research** You have to hang around the location all day to see the flow of customers and who they are. Check out what other food joints around are offering. Find out how much customers are willing to spend. For example, in a city location like Orchard Road, people are looking for unusual cuisine and are willing to spend on that.
- **Train your staff** If you are running your first establishment, train them yourself to save cost. When your business grows, send them for external training. Provide training according to the needs of your business.

### **STUMBLING BLOCKS**

In the last three years, Katherine has found that dealing with food court landlords is one of the thornier aspects of the business. She elaborates, "When a food court landlord offers you a stall in a prime position, he often requires you to take on another stall in the same food court that is in a less desirable location. Yet he charges the same rent for both."

Such situations often put her in a dilemma. "It is as if we are working for the landlords – they are assured of collecting the rental every month regardless of how badly we do." The Sars period also called for tough decisions. "It was quite frightening during that time. Overall sales for our food court business dipped 30 per cent although outlets near the hospitals boomed!" she recalls.

"Many restaurants actually cut staff salaries by 15 to 30 per cent or asked them to take long leave. We had a meeting with senior staff and they agreed to a ten to 15 per cent pay cut. Eventually we didn't implement it. Thankfully, it was over in three months. We got by because we had enough reserves," she said. ▢