

# A menu of dining options

Katrina Holdings' recipe for growth is to serve up seven different dining concepts that target different segments of the market

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**W**ALK around Clarke Quay in search of exotic cuisine and you are greeted by row after row of restaurants offering an eclectic mix of local, Vietnamese, Thai, Indonesian, Chinese and even Mexican fare. Who would guess that no less than four of these disparate concept restaurants, representing four vastly differing cultures, are owned by a single company – Katrina Holdings. Alan Goh is the man behind the company – he is its founder and managing director.

Winning the E50 award tops a list of accomplishments for Mr Goh and his company, as they have already clinched numerous awards for culinary excellence. Reflecting on the award, Mr Goh says: "Getting this award is a recognition of the effort we put in and provides motivation for all the staff."

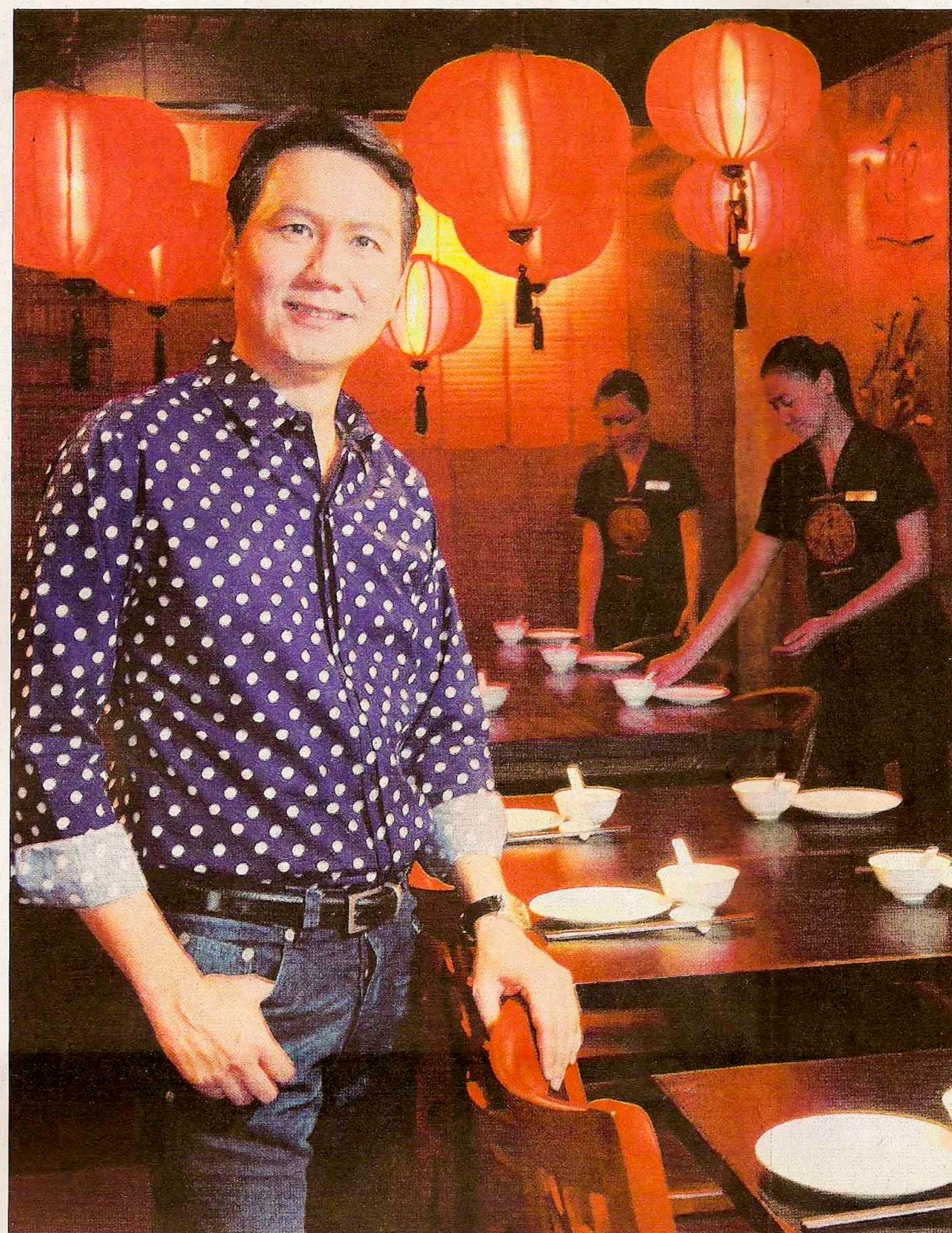
Over the years, Katrina Holdings has been growing its stable of restaurant chains, which include the familiar Balithai and RennThai chains. Today, it boasts seven different dining concepts, with four operating in the Clarke Quay area and the rest in various locations around Singapore.

Rather than using the Katrina name in his restaurants, Mr Goh has opted for a multi-branding strategy, allowing each concept restaurant to tailor its brand to its target consumer. Mr Goh explains: "Every concept offers different menus and pricing and targets different segment of the market; it was best to have a different brand for each, rather than try to put them under an umbrella Katrina brand."

One might wonder why Katrina has four of its restaurants in the same area – Clarke Quay. It started with the opening of a RennThai outlet there. Clarke Quay at the time had already been revamped twice, both times without much success. With a third attempt, this time by CapitaLand, Mr Goh jumped at the opportunity to open there. He always had confidence in waterfront dining, and the fact that it was managed by CapitaLand certainly helped.

Although the venture was not an instant success, it gathered steam very quickly. Mr Goh subsequently developed three other niche concept restaurants: Bayang, which serves Balinese cuisine; Hutong, with its Chinese cuisine; and Muchos, which serves Mexican food.

Each restaurant has a different appeal. RennThai offers traditional and fiery Thai cuisine, as Thai food is popular among tourists



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looking for an Asian dining experience. This attraction to exotic Asian food also drives demand for Bayang, Katrina's Bali-themed restaurant.

Hutong offers traditional northern Chinese cuisine, while its decor is based on a fast-disappearing piece of Chinese culture. Mr Goh explains that the brand is named after Beijing's back alleys, now a rare sight due to urban redevelopment. Musing about the allure of tradi-

tion, Mr Goh quips: "Hutong is a heritage restaurant, and it is fitting that it is located along the Singapore River, which has a heritage of its own. That enhances the charm of the restaurant."

His latest concept, Muchos, at first appears to be a radical departure from his other, Asian-themed restaurants. However, it was conceived along the same lines, targeting widely travelled Singaporeans, Western and

**Looking to spread its wings:** *Although labour woes have affected Katrina's expansion plans in Singapore, Mr Goh is still confident about his company's prospects as well as the future of the regional F&B industry*

Indian expatriates and tourists. According to Mr Goh, "this group prefers classic Mexican food rather than the younger, hipper 'Tex-Mex'-style offerings".

Mr Goh believes in going the extra mile to ensure an authentic dining experience, often delving into the culinary history and aesthetics of the various cultures behind the food in his restaurants. For example, Bayang hires Indonesian chefs to ensure the authenticity of its cuisine and features duck dishes. In addition, the decor features inlays inspired by traditional Balinese shadow puppets.

Aside from his tourist-belt Clarke Quay restaurants, Mr Goh has three other dining concepts namely Balithai, Streets and Honguo, which offer themed concept-restaurant fare at mid-range prices.

Balithai, as the name suggests, serves Indonesian and Thai food. It was Katrina's very first restaurant chain. It was initially set up in Jurong in 1998 to take advantage of the dearth of casual dining restaurants there, especially ones with "Halal" certification. With the success of the first branch in West Mall, the Balithai chain today boasts seven restaurants in Singapore with another one opening at the end of the year in Katong.

Streets was opened when the Hong Kong café concept was catching on here, but business really jumped when Mr Goh got it Halal-certified to accommodate the Malay-Muslim community, which traditionally has more limited options when it comes to Chinese cuisine.

Honguo, whose signature dish is the Yunnan "Cross Bridge Vermicelli", was created to cater to what Mr Goh saw was an untapped market of affluent immigrant Chinese office workers and students in the Bugis area. And he was right; they make up three-quarter of Honguo's customers. It recently extended its geographic base by opening a branch at Nex, a suburban mall in Serangoon, which has attracted more local patrons.

Katrina's concept-dining strategy has paid off handsomely, and one might even be tempted to say that Mr Goh has a Midas touch, seemingly finding success in every dining concept he creates.

Still, the food and beverage business is not without its challenges. It is difficult to recruit

Singaporeans or to find foreign chefs with the tertiary certification or degrees required to meet the employment pass or "S" pass criteria. Worse, quite a number of the chefs who had been with the company for a long time have been unable to get their passes renewed under the new, stricter quotas.

Although this has suspended Katrina's expansion plan in Singapore, Mr Goh is still confident about his company's prospects as well as the future of the regional F&B industry as a whole. As such Katrina ventured overseas, with one Balithai outlet now operating in Beijing.

Evidently, the initial indications have been positive; Mr Goh is already considering the next step in his expansion plans. "We're deciding which brands we want to take regional, which markets we want to put them in, and how we're going to finance and manage them once we do."

While the details are still tentative, we can be certain that the next few years will be very exciting for Katrina Holdings.

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*This series is part of the Enterprise 50 Educational Project between the E50 partners and the NUS Business School. Katrina Holdings was among the E50 winners in 2010. The annual E50 ranking is co-organised by The Business Times and KPMG, sponsored by OCBC Bank, and supported by Spring Singapore, IE Singapore, Infocomm Development Authority and Singapore Business Federation.*