

Life at Large



■ CHEW SENG KIM

One good stall breeds another ... (clockwise from far right) Mr Alan Goh and his wife Katherine, Katrina Nasi Padang; Mr James Loy, Loy Kee Chicken Rice; and Mr Kiang Kin Nam, Hwa Heng Famous Beef Noodle.

Hawker entrepreneurs who ride on food-court boom

LYNN SEAH

HWA HENG FAMOUS BEEF NOODLE used to be a stall in a coffeshop opposite the former Odeon cinema. Today, it is a 14-stall chain.

Loy Kee Chicken Rice started life in a Whampoa hawker centre. Now, there are 13 outlets bearing the name.

Katrina Nasi Padang started operations just two years ago. The husband-and-wife team now has six outlets, and three others serving up Thai food, Ipoh and Penang, food, and fruit juice.

They are three hawker-entrepreneurs who are riding on the food-court boom.

Walk around food courts

and their signboards are there, whether in Scotts Shopping Centre, Tiong Bahru Plaza or Bugis Junction. Another common name is Koo Kee Yong Tow Foo.

Hwa Heng is one of the oldest, moving to Scotts Picnic Food Court in 1985 after the old North Bridge Road coffeshop was razed. After that, there was no stopping its growth.

It is now a company, with Mr Kiang Kin Nam, 56, son of the Hwa Heng founder, as managing director.

Loy Kee went into the business at about the same time when it secured a stall in the makeshift Stamford food court next to the former Satay Club.

Mr James Loy, 40, still has the Whampoa chicken

rice stall, now run by a brother.

Katrina's Alan and Katherine Goh has a different story to tell.

Unlike the other two, the couple, both 36, has no background in the food business. Their first stall in Junction 8 started in late 1993. The wife left her job in fashion sales to see to the running of the business. A year later, her husband left his job as a manager in a financial institution to join her full-time.

Mr Goh says they had intended initially to open a restaurant, but decided against it.

"Restaurants involve high risk because of the high investment, and you have to draw the crowd yourself. In a food court, all the tenants together

draw the crowd."

How did these stalls grow?

It is a matter of one good stall breeds another. Food court operators who start new premises would ask their existing tenants to set up stall, taking advantage of the contact and relationship that has already been built.

It's a different life

FOR two of these hawker-entrepreneurs, the food court business is a far cry from their early hawking days, sweating behind a stove in the humid hawker centre or coffeshop.

Says Mr Loy: "The life of a hawker is hard. They are busy day and night. There is no time to think even."

He recalls his hawker days when he was helping his father run the Whampoa stall. Five adults in the family had to do all the cooking, serving and cleaning.

Now the handphone-toting Mr Loy operates in a different ambience. The food courts are air-conditioned, there are people hired to clean tables and clear disposable crockery, and customers serve themselves.

He rolls up his sleeves only to cook in emergencies when the outlets are short of staff.

Hwa Heng's Mr Kiang adds that when he was in the coffeshop, he does all the cooking alone.

Now, he spends part of his working days in a small office behind his Scotts Picnic stall on

administrative chores like ordering stocks and toting up accounts. The rest of the time, he is out in front helping to serve customers and prepare food.

He leaves for home about 6 pm. His hours are longer than when he used to be in the coffeshop, which stopped operating by midafternoon.

So is life more difficult now? "It all depends on your attitude to work," says Mr Kiang. "If you don't like your work, even one hour would be difficult."

But it's hard to keep up standards

THESE hawker-entrepreneurs do not franchise

their operations. Cooks and helpers are hired when they have secured a place for another outlet.

Katrina has about 100 people on its payroll, and Loy Kee and Hwa Heng about 50 each.

But too many cooks can spoil the broth.

Mr Kiang says customers have complained of varying standards despite all cooks having a standard recipe.

When that happens, he sends people - usually friends or relatives - to try the food at the offending outlet to verify the complaint.

Loy Kee tries to overcome this problem by setting up a central kitchen in Ang Mo Kio which prepares the chicken and sauces for all its outlets. Katrina also

issues its cooks standard recipes but will set up a central kitchen next year.

Hwa Heng is already operating a stall in a food court in Sichuan, China. It serves a variety of beef dishes. There are noodles, too, though the recipe has been adjusted to suit tastes there.

Loy Kee Management Services was set up three months ago to concentrate on overseas ventures. Mr Loy is unable to elaborate on it at the moment.

For the Katrina team, however, the opportunities are more than enough to satisfy them for now. Mr Goh expects more food courts to sprout in the next two years.

His target: to increase from nine to 15 outlets by April next year.