

Upfront

Flying high

MAGDALENE LUM talks to three ex-SIA stewardesses who will invest several million dollars in new food outlets here and abroad

THE Singapore Girl is not just a glamorous face helping the national carrier to lure passengers aboard.

Three ex-Singapore Airlines stewardesses — Mrs Gracie Vitale, Mrs Catherine Hoegberg-Lim and Mrs Katherine Goh — have capitalised on their experience in serving passengers in the air to run their own flourishing food businesses (see other story).

All three, who already own food outlets, have plans to invest a combined sum of around \$5 million in new restaurants, food catering and food court ventures in Singapore and China, with financial backing from their husbands.

Italian style

MRS GRACIE VITALE, 31, who runs the year-old La Forketta Gastronomia Italian Restaurant at South Buona Vista Centre with her Italian husband, Giovanni, 34, plans to spend up to \$3 million on a second Italian restaurant of the same name in a new upmarket shopping centre in the Bukit Timah residential area.

Her new 1,700-sq-ft restaurant will open late this year or early next year and be a "fun place" for people to get together, she says.

Mrs Vitale intends to spend \$2.5 million buying the place and the remaining \$500,000 renovating it.

Her dream is to own a chain of three Italian restaurants here, and later expand into Malaysia and Indonesia.

Chinese style

MRS CATHERINE HOEGBERG-LIM, 36, who runs Mount Pleasant Catering Services, a continental restaurant outlet at the Singapore Polo Club, is setting up

a \$1.53-million food court in Shanghai.

Called Tropicana Food Court, it will sell South-east Asian food like *satay*, *laksa* and Hainanese chicken rice.

The food court, which will open in October with 20 stalls, is located in the three-storey Yu Yuen building in a touristy part of the city.

This, she hopes, will be the first of more such ventures in other provinces in China.

Mrs Hoegberg-Lim, who is married to a Swedish businessman here, Mr Rickard Hoegberg, is venturing into the China business with two other Singapore partners.

The ambitious stewardess-turned-businesswoman also plans to invest another \$200,000 in a second catering outlet at another country club here in August this year. She adds that she has plans to cater to "as many country clubs in Singapore as possible" in future.

Indonesian style

MRS KATHERINE GOH, 35, who runs the Katrina Nasi Padang outlet at Junction 8 food court in Bishan, plans to invest a total of \$400,000 in five more Indonesian food stalls here by next year.

Each outlet will cost a minimum of \$70,000.

Two of them will open in two food courts in the Orchard Road area at the end of the year, while a third will be opened in the city area early next year.

Mrs Goh is considering offers to set up two further outlets at other food courts, which are expected to open around the same time as the first three outlets.

She also wants to open a juice bar in an Orchard Road food court by the year's end or next year.



Mrs Goh, who runs the Katrina Nasi Padang outlet in Junction 8, plans to invest a total of \$400,000 in five more food stalls.



Mrs Vitale, who runs La Forketta Gastronomia, plans to spend up to \$3 million on a second Italian restaurant of the same name.



Mrs Hoegberg-Lim, of Mount Pleasant Catering Services, plans to spend about \$1.7 million.

Why the food trade?

AN AIRLINE background, a love for cuisines and the dream of owning their own restaurants were what made three ex-Singapore Girls sink their money into the food business.

■ For example, Mrs Gracie Vitale, 31, and her friend Mrs Catherine Hoegberg-Lim, 36, used to fly on the same routes and their careers exposed them to the different cuisines abroad.

Says Mrs Vitale: "We used to visit restaurants in Europe and the United States and this started us dreaming of owning our own restaurants someday."

She met her husband Giovanni, an Italian art director and designer while on an SIA flight from Bali to Rome in 1985. They married a year later.

Mrs Vitale resigned as leading stewardess in 1992 after 10 years to set up her own business.

The Vitales pumped \$500,000 into the La Forketta Restaurant in South Buona Vista Road.

■ Mrs Hoegberg-Lim was a stewardess for five years from 1981 to 1985, before she went to Switzerland to take a food and beverage management course for over a year.

On her return, she worked for short stints in the food and beverage line at various hotels, before joining the Pine Tree Club for three years.

Her dream of owning her own business came true when her application as caterer for the Singapore Polo Club was accepted.

In 1991, she started her catering company with just under \$100,000. "My SIA background was a big help as it taught me to deal with all kinds of people," she says.

■ Mrs Katherine Goh, 35, went into the food line on the promptings of her husband, Mr Alan Goh, 35, manager of a charge-card company.

Mrs Goh, who was an SIA stewardess for 11 years from 1977 to 1988, wanted to set up a Peranakan restaurant at Boat Quay originally but changed her mind as she felt she was still new to the business.

Instead she invested \$70,000 in Katrina Nasi Padang at the Junction 8 food court in Bishan.

"Having worked in an airline has helped me work very fast to provide good service to my customers," she says, adding that on short flights, stewardesses would have to "serve the food and collect the trays fast before the plane lands".

"After panting in the galley, we have to go and smile at the passengers when they leave."