



A HOT BUSINESS

MS PATRICIA LEE
CHILLI API CATERING PTE LTD



“
DO EVERYTHING WITH PASSION.
”

UP CLOSE & PERSONAL

What excites you about the future of your industry?
Although it's a part of the food industry - catering is nonetheless something quite different and unique. Big catering companies are called institution caterers. And interestingly, Singapore is the only country in the world where there is such a huge events catering market. That being said, the issues that we face are not what restaurants face. Thus when it comes to finding automation software or the right kitchen equipment, we rarely can find anything off-the-rack. Thus we have to virtually customise everything. But to us, that's one exciting aspect of what we do. In addition, NEA is currently eyeing the catering industry to test out new initiatives. For example, food safety drives, ideas for higher standards in food preparation - these all begin with the catering industry. We're thus spearheading a lot of things in the F&B scene in Singapore.

How do you approach problems in life?
We have good staff who have been with us for quite a while. They have initiative and work well as a team. We also like to keep an open mind and a positive attitude. My business partners tell me that being calm under pressure is one of my greatest assets.

Passion or Practicality?
Both. My work is my passion. When it comes to business, we also have to be pragmatic and yet very enthusiastic about work. Striking the balance whilst keeping emotions in check is crucial. That helps me solve problems efficiently.

How has your past experience helped you as an entrepreneur and business person?
I did not have any experience in business. In fact I was developing photographs before that! When I started this business, I was being "bullied" by the chefs. It was my mentor who for about 3 - 4 years, helped me face these and other problems and learn important lessons so I am truly grateful.

How do you stand out from your competitors?
We are proud of our latest innovations and are very concerned with environmental sustainability. For example we tackled the matter of food wastage by being the first caterer to invest in a food waste recycling machine. Waste is currently being recycled into food compost and given back to the community as fertilised soil. We expect to produce 200 kg of food compost a day.

The name Chilli Api has reached household status as one of the country's most beloved caterers. But many fans may not know that the founders actually opened a restaurant first in 2002 before branching into catering.

Founder and director Ms Patricia Lee had become acquainted with a master Peranakan chef and that helped her establish a foothold and foundation in the F&B industry. Back then, armed with passion and a genuine love for great food, Patricia did most of her own cooking for the restaurant. Like many family businesses, she was hands-on and well-versed with the daily operations.

Since the inception of its catering arm, revenues have been increasing steadily every year. Today, Chilli Api is one of the larger caterers in town. For retail customers, the company positions itself as a mid-level Peranakan caterer. However, with 50 over chefs this phenomenal enterprise satisfies its customers with a range of various cuisines - ranging from international to Indian, whilst specialising in Peranakan fare. They even have some corporate customers who order every day!

One major event that has helped shape the company culture was the SARS period in 2003. The dry spell in business then made the company more prudent and conservative in terms of business expansion. The understanding that situations could change overnight caused them to make contingencies for the worst. Business continuity has thus been a central focus in their strategy.

Due to the volume of repeat customers, one operational issue faced by this company has always been in keeping up with demand. On the flip side, they do not require much advertising in the market - relying on mainly organic growth.

Known for their quality food - their menu features a lot of signature Nonya dishes, rather than generic offerings such as deep fried foods. This makes them a truly unique, traditional and authentic Peranakan food establishment.

What started with less than five people is now a thriving group of businesses with more than 200 staff. Ms Patricia is now head of catering and restaurant operations. 2019 will see a major expansion in their kitchen space, a move which the management believes will help the company gain more market share in the catering sector. Currently, ABR Holdings have come in as one of the major investors. The investing company which also manages Swensen's holds the potential to bring Chilli Api to a whole new level in the near future.