

Collin's savours success with affordable Western dishes

Homegrown brand grew out of chef Collin Ho's passion for carving out his own F&B niche

By Boey Chun Weng, Lim Kai Xiang, Bay Jo-Lene and Chua Sue Yu

FANCY quality Western food but not keen to pay exorbitant prices? Then head for the restaurants and outlets operated by Collin's, a homegrown F&B brand.

It all began in 2011 when Collin Ho took a small loan and opened his first owner-operated Western food stall, in the most unlikely of places – at a Food Loft coffeeshop in Geylang.

This proved to be pivotal to Mr Ho's growth as an entrepreneur as his talent caught the eye of Food Loft coffeeshop operator, Alex Chia. The following year, the latter invited Mr Ho to launch the Collin's brand.

"It was not easy, it was a lot of hard work. In order to make a profit, you have to do everything, including dishwashing, and working long hours," recounted Mr Ho of his early days of blood, sweat and tears when he was a full hands-on chef – and more.

He worked an average of 15 hours per day, starting early in the morning at 8am. If he felt dead on his feet, he would take short naps in his car. During this period, he lost 10 kilograms, but his efforts paid off.

The Collin's brand today is established, with nine restaurants and 16 outlets in Singapore, and one outlet each in Jakarta, Indonesia and Phnom Penh, Cambodia, all of which cater to wealthier consumers.

"The market for Western fare then was at either end: affordable but of poor quality or high-end but expensive," said Mr Ho, about the inspiration behind the first coffeeshop stall.

Driven by the desire to bridge the gap and offer premium fare at great value, he embarked on his venture eight years ago.

Mr Ho shares: "Thankfully, my family was very supportive and invested in the first stall with me. Then came the overwhelming response from customers which led to the opening of more and more outlets."

By maintaining pocket-friendly prices and innovative concepts, Collin's has managed to grow its customer base, both in size as well as diversity.

It uses different types of outlets for different market segments – eight



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Entrepreneur Collin Ho on building his Collin's brand from scratch

coffee shop stalls serve hearty and affordable Western dishes in the heartlands, while another eight restaurants in shopping malls target shoppers and offer a wider range of food selections and full-fledged service.

In 2017, Common Grill by Collin's was added to the chain's line of concept restaurants, providing customers the choice to mix and match its mains with a myriad side dishes.

This customisation option is a unique experience not many restaurants offer.

By catering to the preferences of young adults for variety and customisation, Collin's managed to successfully attract the younger generation.

Consistent great taste

At the core of its business, Collin's takes special care to ensure its food quality is of the highest standards, and is consistent throughout its outlets.

To do so, the company's central kit-



The Common Grill, which is also managed by Collin's, allows diners to mix and match mains and side dishes.

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chen was established in 2013 to address a need when Mr Ho expanded beyond the single Geylang stall.

He explained: "I found that quality and consistency were very bad. Even if I gave the recipe to the chef, they couldn't recreate the same taste that I wanted."

"So, to overcome this, I decided to set up a central kitchen to control the quality and consistency (of the food)." Now, the central kitchen, located in Gourmet East Kitchen @ Bedok, which has state-of-the-art equipment, is at the heart of the firm's operations.

Adapting to changing preferences

To adapt to customers' ever-changing tastes, Collin's creatively adapts its menus by using technology, data analytics and unique chef collaborations.

"Customer preferences are changing everywhere, every moment, every minute," pointed out Mr Ho.

To cater to the changing tastes, Collin's creates new recipes and dishes by collaborating with many seasoned chefs.

"My team now is bigger, we have a group of talented chefs with us," Mr Ho proudly shared.

The company recently recruited chef Edmund Toh, who is the former president of the Singapore Chefs Association, as its vice-president of culinary.

Chef Toh brings with him experience from Resorts World Sentosa and Singapore Hotels and Tourism Education Centre (Shatec) for his insights on kitchen operations.

Leveraging Chef Toh's expertise, Collin's hopes to nurture young and bright chefs who are looking for a platform to test out new culinary concepts.

The company provides the space, equipment and funding to groom

these budding chefs and facilitates the creation of new innovative ideas.

Expansion plans

As part of its future plans, Collin's wants to cater more to the Muslim market as halal Western food is not widely available in Singapore.

Collin's recently opened a new restaurant concept at Jewel Changi named Elfuego or "fire" in Spanish, a semi fine-dining restaurant that serves modern European cuisine that is halal-certified.

Elfuego offers an exceptional menu, including its Tomahawk Steak smoked in a special machine and cooked to perfection to bring out the flavour of the beef.

The menu is designed by chef Toh and chef Koh Han Jie, winner of the Young Talents Escoffier 2018, and who had previously worked at the two-Michelin-starred French restaurant, Les Amis.

In May 2019, Collin's opened a new outlet at Westgate Mall, marking its first presence on the western side of Singapore. It also opened at the newly refurbished Funan Mall, and the newest outlet is at Paya Lebar Quarter Mall.

Beyond the shores of Singapore, Collin's, which has a branch each in Jakarta and Phnom Penh since December 2018, is eyeing China's huge market. "We do intend to expand more, further overseas," said Mr Ho.

Advice for entrepreneurs

On the secret behind Collin's success, Mr Ho has nuggets of advice for young entrepreneurs.

"Hard work pays off, so always be hardworking," he said. "You cannot be contented or someone else will chase you out. You have got to work hard."

Reflecting on his own journey, Mr Ho concludes: "Every day is still a learning journey."