

Singapore chocolate maker seeks sweet spot in global market

Aalst Chocolate exports 98 per cent of its products to over 55 countries globally and is striving to become Asia's leading manufacturer of quality chocolates. **BY NICOLE CHAN, HON SHI RUI, HU SHUYI AND NATALIE HONG**

HAVE you ever wondered where the chocolate in your favourite snacks comes from? You may be surprised to find out that the shot of cocoa goodness did not come from Switzerland but could have originated from Tuas, Aalst Chocolate's factory right here in Singapore.

A major chocolate manufacturer in Asia, Aalst Chocolate can produce up to 36,000 metric tonnes of chocolate products per year.

With 6 brands to its name, the company exports 98 per cent of its products to over 55 countries globally, becoming the first Singaporean brand with the capability to produce both chocolate couvertures and compounds.

Founded by Richard Lee and Connie Kwan, chief executive officer and managing director of Aalst Chocolate respectively, the company has grown significantly since its formation in 2003.

From a young startup, it is now one of the most reputable chocolate brands in Asia.

Breaking into an industry traditionally dominated by European companies was by no means easy. Despite the long odds, Lee and Kwan embraced the challenge and decided to do something that very few would consider as they saw a gap in the Asian market that could be filled by Aalst Chocolate.

Harnessing their cumulative experience in food and chocolate manufacturing, the husband-and-wife team seized the opportunity, leading the company to where it is today.

Staying competitive

Going up against European chocolate manufacturers who have strong reputation and brand recognition in the chocolate industry, Aalst Chocolate has to challenge the stereotype that chocolate is a European product.

In order to succeed, the company has placed a strong focus on quality. To ensure the quality of its chocol-



Aalst Chocolate's key management team with founders Richard Lee (front, centre) and Connie Kwan (2nd from right). Even as the company invests heavily in machinery and R&D, it also continues to retain and nurture skilled manpower in its operations. PHOTO: AALST CHOCOLATE

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In 2020, it commissioned a Micro-Factory at its Tuas chocolate manufacturing plant, a system that consolidates the full industrial chocolate production set-up into a more manageable lab-sized scale.

The first of its kind in Asia, the Micro-Factory has improved the effectiveness of the R&D team.

As it allows Aalst Chocolate to manufacture in smaller batches, the R&D team can give full rein to their creativity to develop customised chocolates for corporate gifts and special occasions.

The elevated quality of chocolates has enabled Aalst Chocolate to cater to the increasingly refined taste buds of consumers.

The company has also invested in a committed quality control team who work to uphold and maintain food safety in manufacturing and product quality.

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In order to stay ahead of the game, the company ensures that it keeps up with industry trends.

With manufacturers placing greater emphasis on the sourcing of their ingredients and origin stories in response to the growing demand for single-source chocolates, Aalst Chocolate has released its own range

of single-origin products from Madagascar, the Dominican Republic and Peru.

Aalst Chocolate has received affirmation for its quality offerings, winning awards such as the Monde Selection Gold Award in 2014, 2017 and 2020, putting it on par with long-established European brands.

"Awards are especially important for an Asian chocolate manufacturer like Aalst Chocolate to gain international recognition," Kwan said.

Even as the company invests heavily in machinery and R&D, it also continues to retain and nurture skilled manpower in its operations.

As Kwan noted: "Invest in not just machines, but people."

She also stressed the need to leverage on knowledge that one possesses.

By focusing on one's own expertise, such skills can be developed and turned into an advantage over the competition.

In its constant pursuit of growth, Aalst Chocolate recognises the importance of continuous expansion and improvement to keep pace with developments.

This includes upgrading and improving the quality of products and services offered to consumers.

Overcoming Covid-19 challenges

The Covid-19 pandemic has dealt a heavy blow to countries and businesses. In Singapore, the government imposed a two-month Circuit Breaker in April 2020 in its battle to stop the spread of Covid-19.

Chocolate production was initially classified as a non-essential industry and Aalst Chocolate had to suspend its operations.

But being a core ingredient in many other essential products such as breads and biscuits, the suspension of chocolate production was eventually lifted.

Following discussion and review by the authorities, the company was allowed to resume its operations.

In spite of the pandemic, Aalst Chocolate has remained resilient.

When trade shows, a key marketing avenue, were cancelled, the company sought alternative methods to improve its business.

It designed a virtual tour around its premises to engage with potential clients, introducing them to the company's facilities and capabilities.

With the duty-free sector adversely affected as air travel plunged, the company expanded its sales channels to sell its products online instead of relying on physical sales at Changi Airport.

The pandemic also brought manpower challenges. With the closure of the Singapore-Malaysia borders, many of Aalst's workers from Malaysia returned home, resulting in a manpower crunch.

To overcome this, the company devised succession and re-training plans for its employees.

Expanding the skill sets of employees has made it easier to flexibly deploy them in various roles.

Future plans

Aalst Chocolate is seeking to expand to India and Indonesia, two large markets with great potential.

It also hopes to increase the number of training facilities in the region to seed a new generation of chocolatiers and chocolate enthusiasts for the industry, while aiming to increase its annual revenue 5-fold.

Thanks to its resilient and enterprising spirit, Aalst Chocolate has overcome many challenges and weathered storms over the past 18 years to emerge as a stronger company, emboldened and excited to capitalise on the opportunities of the future, remaining steadfast and committed to its vision "to be the leading producer of quality chocolate in Asia".

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This series is part of the Enterprise 50 Educational Project between the E50 partners and the NUS Business School. Aalst Chocolate was among the winners in 2019. The annual E50 ranking is co-organised by The Business Times and KPMG, sponsored by OCBC Bank, and supported by Enterprise Singapore, Singapore Exchange and Singapore Business Federation.

