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Not chickening out of his dream

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PRODUCTIVITY and automation seem to be the latest buzzwords, especially in the food and beverage business.

But long before the government sounded its clarion call, entrepreneur and CEO Alson Teo of Stamfles Group already saw the future of the F&B business – it was in automation and internationalisation.

Some 15 years ago, Mr Teo had a vision of a chicken rice concept restaurant, supported by a robust back-end automation that is replicable in any part of the world. So he and a team of engineers, a food science team and the late chef Toh Thian Ser came up with iKook, world's first patented, automated poultry cooker.

Mr Teo recalled how he had to convince the late Mr Toh, an ex-chef at Shangri-La, that a machine can cook just as well as a human.

But after seeing the capabilities of just the first prototype, Mr Toh was onboard, formulating recipes and ideas for the project, which he

worked on till he died of cancer in 2006.

Now in its sixth edition, the iKook, which is conceptualised, designed and assembled in Singapore, can cook up to 10 birds in about 40 minutes. The machine ensures consistent cooking when braising or poaching a chicken, retaining its flavours and nutrients.

Creating a machine that cooks chicken is more complex than it appears to be. For example, different parts of the chicken require different cooking times.

Throughout the decade, different research teams from National University of Singapore's Design Technology Institute and Singapore Polytechnic's Food Innovation and Resource Centre have worked on the machine.

The sixth prototype is equipped with a touch screen and made with Japanese parts after Mitsubishi heard about the project and wanted to be part of it.

The iKook is used in Roost, a four-month-old local eatery that serves chicken rice and other Asian dishes.

But to Mr Teo, the creation of the

iKook is not meant to grow chicken rice restaurants in Singapore – his aim since 15 years ago is to bring chicken rice to the world.

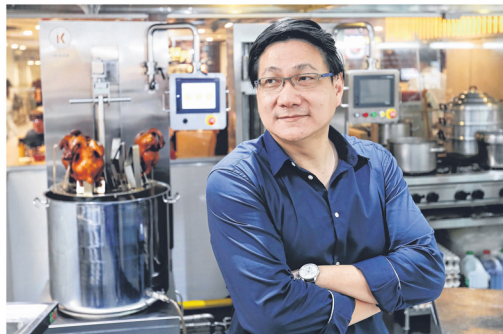
"We were way ahead of our time. More than 10 years ago, nobody talked about scaling up the F&B model and internationalisation," he said.

"But I realised, even back then, that you cannot have a business model that is solely dependent on the chefs' skills. You wouldn't be able to grow and make it out of Singapore."

A master chef can be at only one place at a time. But with the iKook, the same level of consistent, good food can be achieved and scaled up anywhere, added Mr Teo.

To date, Mr Teo has invested at least S\$1.2 million to perfect the machine. He believes that the iKook is finally ready to move beyond Singapore shores.

Mr Teo said he is in discussions with partners in countries such as Japan, China, London and Australia. He is looking to use the franchise or joint venture model to bring the concept of Roost, together with the iKook, overseas.



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PHOTO:
KELVIN CHING

His team has also created the sauces and pastes, used in cooking the different dishes at Roost, to be part of the package deal.

While the iKook was invented primarily to cook poultry, it can also cook other types of meats in various styles, including sous vide.

Mr Teo said they are still in the process of experimenting with other

dishes, such as bak kut teh, using the iKook.

While there have been offers to buy just the machine, Mr Teo said he is in no hurry to sell it at the moment as his primary goal is to maintain relationships with possible joint venture or franchise partners.

Reflecting on his entrepreneurial journey, he admitted that the road is

often "lonely", but his persistence on the iKook is rooted on the strong conviction that the world market is a much bigger one. Even with little funding and support, he has pushed on.

"I always believe that you must be passionate in what you do, and then work out the business model to sustain it."