

THE SUNDAY TIMES

It Changed My Life!

First the Roost, then the roost

Eatery boss plans to go global with the world's first automated poultry cooking machine



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The bigger the tree, so the Chinese proverb goes, the more it catches the wind.

Mr Alison Teo will tell you that the saying holds true. About 15 years ago, he was standing tall in the institutional catering scene in Singapore.

Then only 33, he worked Stamford, which had about 35 corporate canteens providing thousands of meals daily, employed 500 people and enjoyed an annual turnover of more than \$20 million.

Things changed when Stamford scored a coup and won a plump contract from a big multinational corporation. It prompted a larger international rival to launch separate lawsuits against Mr Teo and eight of his staff accusing them of among other things, corporate espionage and stealing trade secrets.

It took him more than three years and hundreds of thousands of dollars in legal fees to fight the case. The court ruled in his favour but Mr Teo paid a heavy price.

"A lot of people didn't think that going over my legal woes and congratulating me on the sale. But I was crying inside," he says.

But any bitterness over the episode is long gone. If not for

what happened, he says, he might not have what he now hopes will take him global, IBook, the world's first automated poultry cooking machine.

The contraption cost him more than \$1 million and has taken 10 years to develop. It can poach, braise and fry your side chicken and other poultry, and helps lock in nutrients and flavours.

Some vials is a cooking method that involves immersing vacuum-sealed food in a water bath at precise temperatures.

The IBook can cook 10 birds in 40 minutes and is the star at Roost, an eatery Mr Teo opened in Centrepoint five months ago. It serves chicken rice and other South-east Asian dishes.

Mr Teo is now in talks to export both the IBook and Roost franchise to food operators in six countries, including China, Australia and Britain.

The food and beverage industry has fascinated Mr Teo for as long as he can remember. The fourth of five children of a car dealer and a housewife, he grew up in a rented two-room flat in Toa Payoh.

As an eight-year-old, he ran his own "restaurant" at home.

"I'd set up the dining table, borrow curries from neighbours, fry chips and make fried rice, say 40 cents for the experience. Oh, and they had to bring their own spoons," he says.

Although business was brisk, he had to shut it down because the parents of his patrons wind up to his shenanigans.

"They were wondering why their kids were asking them not just for money but also eggs. It was such a lousy deal for them," he says with a laugh.

Next, he started getting soon-loved from a supplier but his home and peddling the steamed Chinese dumplings after school and on weekends. To gain an edge over his competitors, he got his mother to make a special chili sauce to go with the dumplings.

His family, he says, used to have with them a small chicken to eat on weekends. To gain an edge over his competitors, he got his mother to make a special chili sauce to go with the dumplings.

"Preparations would begin on Saturday. I loved the smell, the hard work, the process of preparing the dishes that we enjoyed. I knew from a very young age that I wanted to be in this trade."

Sweeney's, three or four nights a week.

"It was my choice. I was never interested in books and studies. I



Mr Alison Teo (left) at a food and beverage fair during his S'pore days. The F&B industry has long fascinated him. PHOTO COURTESY OF ALISON TEO



Mr Stamford (left) with the late renowned chef Toh Thian Ser, whom he persuaded to join Stamford. PHOTO COURTESY OF ALISON TEO

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Mr Alison Teo (left) and Mr Toh Thian Ser, who he persuaded to join Stamford, at a food and beverage fair. PHOTO COURTESY OF ALISON TEO

After completing his national service, he went for food and beverage studies at the Singapore Hotel and Tourism Education Centre (S'pore) in 1989.

Upon graduation, he worked for a year as a restaurant manager at Swensen's before joining an international institutional catering company. His duties included running a staff cafeteria on Pulau Ayer Merbau, an island that housed European military facilities.

"I was then living in Hongkong. Every morning, I had to wake up at 5am and catch the first ferry from Paik Pier to the island. It was a touch-and-go situation every day," he recalls with a grimace. Because getting to work proved too exhausting, he decided to stay on the island. The storehouse became his bedroom.

He says "There was nobody around at night, except for the security guards. So, in the evenings, I'd just do my paperwork and learn to cook. It was a bit creepy. If I tune in to a Mandarin station on my radio it would get changed to a Tamil one every night."

Working on the island was like being in the army, he says. "I'd book out on Saturday afternoon and go back to the island on Sunday evening."

In less than a year, he was promoted and given a car.

Although the pay was good, he quit. "It was burnt-out. I spent one year soul-searching. I was probably a bit depressed," he says.

A year later, in 1997, he received a call from a former client.

Mr Teo told him he was no longer in the business, but the client offered him a contract, worth about a million dollars, and told him to start a company.

"I want my plan to start a business," says Mr Teo, who borrowed the use of his sister's office and phoned \$20,000 of his savings into starting Stamford.

"I thought I would happily serve just that one account but other people started calling. By the second year, I had a second contract," he says.

By the fourth year, he was doing so well that an international player from Singapore wanted to team up at the famed Peninsula Hotel and catered to his company.

He declined the offer because he wanted to grow the company over the next couple of years. By 2002, Stamford was pulling in \$20 million in sales revenue.

The company scored a coup by

landing a huge contract but ironically, it also triggered a nightmare.

A big international rival that had expressed to be awarded the contract launched separate suits against Mr Teo and eight of his employees in the High Court.

"I had to decide if I should defend or indemnify myself. The lawyer told me that if I did, and if we lost, it would be the end of me," he says.

It took him a few nights to arrive at the decision in his heart. He knew what the answer was.

"I told the lawyer I would take on everything. One of the things I've learnt about entrepreneurship is that you also have to be a leader for your team. Our livelihoods were at stake. I didn't want to be called a coward for the rest of my life."

Tears start welling up in his eyes and he pauses to compose himself.

"I didn't tell my wife. I told her only that I was defending myself," says Mr Teo, who was by then married with three children.

His wife is a systems analyst. Their twins - a boy and a girl - are now 17 and the youngest, a boy, is 15.

It was a no-brainer. The legal fees on the case - which dragged on for nearly four years - amounted to nearly \$100,000 a month. In less than a year, his savings were depleted. He had to sell the business to raise funds, he says.

He sold his majority stake in Stamford to British-based food service company Compas in 2004. About five years later, he sold the rest of his stake. Compas, however, allowed him to take the Stamford name.

The moment they came on board, I knew that no matter what happened to me, the company would still grow," he says.

Ironically during this period, Mr Teo and Stamford won several honours, including the Rotary SME award in 2003, and the Enterprise 50 award in 2003 and 2004.

His nightmare ended only in 2005, when the High Court threw out an appeal by the plaintiff after about a year of legal wrangling.

One of the people Mr Teo had a second contract with was Mr Steven Lim, who was Stamford's assistant general manager at the time.

Lim and Teo were helped to indemnify us. All of us at Stamford were asked to buy the shares of Mr Lim, Mr Lim, Mr Lim, who is now Stamford's president for the production kitchen.

The unhappy chapter in his entrance into the world of business, Mr Teo thinks of a new scalable business model, one that was not so reliant on staff and chefs.

"While on a trip to New York in 2003, I was charmed upon a Krusty Kreme outlet in Wall Street."

"It was a Sunday and Wall Street was very quiet except for this outlet. There were only two staff members serving a steady stream of customers. I peeped into the kitchen and saw a machine churning out doughnuts," he says.

It sparked off an idea to use automation to internationalise the Singapore model. When he came home, he called to the late renowned chef Toh Thian Ser, whom he had persuaded to join Stamford.

"He took a long time to be convinced but I told him I wanted to plant his brain into a machine and replicate his culinary skills in every part of the world. And I wanted to do it with chicken rice because it's the national dish of Singapore."

Discussions to design the IBook started with engineers, says Mr Teo, who also worked with design and technology experts from the National University of Singapore as well as the Food Innovation Research Centre.

The first prototype took two years. Mr Teo initially didn't really buy it but when he saw the prototype, he started to really believe in the project. Unfortunately, he developed stage four colon cancer but he was wised up on it and he took his last breath in 2006.

Mr Teo says: "It made me think, 'What would you say if you spend your last breath on?' I wanted to spend it doing something really believe in."

The IBook went through another five iterations before Mr Teo rolled it out.

After getting his Stamford trademark back, he has devoted all his energies to developing the world's first automated poultry cooking machine.

The company - which currently employs 50 workers and has an annual turnover of about \$10 million - still does institutional catering but on a much smaller scale.

"In two months, we are also starting an e-commerce platform for our demand, food, targeting corporates and households," he says.

When asked if he would have turned out differently, he shakes his head.

"Things, he says, happen for a reason. I wouldn't change a thing."

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Mr Teo is hoping his latest idea, the IBook, will help him go global. The IBook is the world's first automated poultry cooking machine. The contraption cost him more than \$1 million and took 10 years to develop. It can poach, braise and fry your side chicken and other poultry, and helps lock in nutrients and flavours. ST PHOTO: AIRPHI JOHAR