

Alson Teo started small and worked hard. Today, his cafeteria company has grown into a \$20 million business

Against ALL ODDS

By Gary Lim

THE odds were stacked against Alson Teo when he decided to start his food business in late 1997.

All he had was \$20,000 in his savings account, a food and beverage trade certificate and seven years' experience working for a food caterer.

To make matters worse, there was a recession then.

But he was determined to venture forth.

At 27, he felt he was going

nowhere as a business development manager in a food catering company.

He started small, setting up a staff cafeteria in an Ang Mo Kio factory.

Today, Mr Teo, 33, is the director of Stamflles Food Management, which runs 30 staff cafeterias - mostly located in semi-conductor and wafer fab plants - and employs about 500 workers who serve 50,000 meals a day.

During the time his business was growing, he branched out into food catering for homes and offices.

In addition, he started another business arm involved in the design and construction of facilities such as laundry, waste disposal and recreational amenities for companies in the gas, oil and construction sectors.

All these contributed to a \$20 million turnover last year, a year which also saw Stamflles Food Management make it to the Enterprise 50 list, which ranks the top 50 private companies.

Said Mr Teo, who obtained a Singapore Institute of Management diploma in management studies in 1997 after attending two years of night classes: "I

don't think I have a definite answer on the key to my success but I believe it's my sincerity.

"Till today, I don't have a single salesman as I handle all sales personally."

Sheer perseverance and hard work, Mr Teo added, ensured him a relatively smooth passage over six years marked by recessions, the 9/11 attacks, and now, the war in Iraq.

As he ate his late lunch of fried rice in a staff cafeteria in Changi, he said: "I'm quite used to all these ups and downs, but they are getting tougher and tougher."

"However, you're not out in the business world to think about all these things."

"I'm proud to say that I've yet to borrow even a single cent from any bank and all my profits have gone to enhance my company's cashflow."

Such prudence has enabled him to pump money into Stamflles during a period when most organisations are cutting back on expenses.

He invested \$150,000 in research and design last year, and another \$300,000 in a computer system - to be up and running by June. This will link all 30 cafeterias electronically to his office.

He said: "I was managing 10 cafeterias on my own when I realised that I needed to seek help. I now have about 20 management staff."

"In fact, the business is expanding so rapidly that we'll be changing our current location to a 7,000 sq ft office to accommodate more workers."

"This is the third time in five years we're moving."

Interestingly, the entrepreneurial spirit in him was already lit during his primary school days.

Born into an average-income family of five, he sold soon kueh (bamboo shoot dumplings) and durians after school to earn about \$1 a day.

Knowing from an early age how hard it is to earn an honest living has made him appreciate the simpler things in life.

Not for him are displays of



opulence, such as diamond-studded Rolex watches and fancy sports cars. He is happy with his Calvin Klein watch which he said is part of a lovers' pair.

His systems analyst wife wears the other piece.

He drives an aqua-green Toyota Picnic and lives in an HDB executive apartment in Woodlands. He bought his car about a year ago to better accommodate his family of wife and three children with whom he spends every Sunday - his only day off.

"Every Sunday, I wake up appreciating the fact that I don't have to work on that day, especially since I'm in the food and beverage business," he said.

"My three-year-old twins and one-year-old son also let me see the softer side of the world, not just the ruthless business environment which I go through six days a week."

"They slow me down, and I think that's a blessing."

His only set of priorities for himself

and his staff is: Family, work and play.

This is a contrast to his early days when he used to demand "120 per cent effort" from every worker.

Now he has plans to venture out of the factories and into the food retail sector.

Barring unforeseen circumstances, his first cafe or restaurant should be up and running by September. He plans to employ an additional four to eight management staff for the project.

But his ultimate aspiration is to move his business beyond Singapore in three years' time. He has yet to decide which division will spearhead his internationalisation effort.

Said Mr Teo: "My dream is to make people proud of Stamflles, and ultimately, the Singapore flag."

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