

Building on a proud legacy

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Monday, 11 Feb 2019



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Long serving: Many of its employees have spent years moving up the ranks with the company.

Group exploring plans for regional expansion as the brand grows in strength

JAPANESE restaurants are a dime a dozen, to put it crudely.

From multi-outlet sushi joints to high-end internationally renowned brands, Malaysian consumers have long been captivated by the novelty of dining on raw fish and fresh seafood that is so closely associated with Japanese cuisine. Walk into any mall, and there will be one, if not a few, Japanese restaurant that will be brimming with people waiting in line for a seat.

But few locally-founded chains have managed to match up to the legacy of and connection to the Japanese food scene quite like Kampachi.

Kampachi Restaurants Sdn Bhd, which owns the namesake restaurant chain, first opened its doors in 1973 at the former Equatorial Hotel along Jalan Sultan Ismail in Kuala Lumpur. The family-run business has served up Japanese fare for more than 45 years and remains one of the oldest surviving Japanese restaurants in the country.

In fact, Kampachi used to be the flag bearer for the Equatorial Hotel, which is owned by the same family, and was a well-known dining destination in the city.

The chain has kept its core management team to a small group of key personnel but has managed to pull off what could be considered a significant culinary coup.



Looking beyond: Wong says the family-owned business is looking at regional opportunities.

As it embarks on a new growth chapter, general manager Theresa Wong, who joined the team last year, says the company will continue its rich tradition of offering products that are exclusively from Japan.

Wong is tasked with maintaining the high expectation associated with the brand and to oversee its growth into new markets. This will be a test of both financial savvy and human resource factors in ensuring its service quality is in tip-top condition.

Wong's first exposure to the F&B industry happened in a distant land. While working with an accounting firm in London in the 1990s, she was caught up with the vibrant dining scene in the cosmopolitan city.

Upon her return to Malaysia in 2004, she found the F&B industry a rather good match for her.

For many of its loyal customers, Kampachi is the real deal. It is seen as a pioneer of Japanese restaurants in Malaysia before the public had yet to fully comprehend the genre.

One of its unique selling points is its grip in the product and supply sourcing value chain.

The restaurant group gets its supply of fresh seafood from Tokyo's famed Tsukiji market (which has since relocated to the Toyosu Fish Market at the end of last year). Having run the stores for three generations, Wong says Kampachi's direct sourcing means that the freshness of its seafood is quite unmatched.



A place of nostalgia: The first outlet along Jalan Sultan Ismail was a well-known dining destination in the city.

“While there are many other importers who distribute products directly from the market in Japan, they have to be kept and repackaged before they can be distributed to other restaurants in town. But having our own network means we have the selection of the freshest fish and seafood,” she explains.

It is also one of the few outlets in town that regularly offers familiarisation sessions to its customers and the public to increase awareness, exposure and appreciation of Japanese sake.

Some of its sake and *shochu* are also sourced direct from brewers, mainly family-run boutique brewers that offer unique blends or brews that are exclusive to Kampachi.

Given the demanding nature of running an F&B business, Kampachi has been focusing on its three core values, namely, quality, service and ambient, to stay ahead of the competition.

Doing business is also about trust and building relationships with your partners and customers, says Wong. Being able to create a sense of connection with the customers can help a brand go a long way.

One of the main challenges faced by Kampachi is in recruiting and retaining talent. Getting the right people with the right attitude and commitment to service is not easy, says Wong.

“The experience in the business also helps in maintaining a management style that works, proven by the fact that many of our employees have spent years and even decades with the company, eventually moving up the ranks and becoming a part of the management team,” she says.

Competition in the industry is getting tougher, not just from the Japanese restaurant segment but also due to the wide variety of cuisines available in the market today. However, Wong says the group sees this challenge as an opportunity to grow the Japanese cuisine community in Malaysia. Demand is still growing, she notes.

Kampachi will be operating three outlets within the Klang Valley; one in Jaya 33 in Petaling Jaya, in Pavilion KL and the upcoming outlet in EQ Hotel, where the current outlet in The Troika will be relocating to.

It used to operate around five Kampachi restaurants including outlets in Penang and Melaka – all located within the Lim family-owned Equatorial hotels. However, the group has been consolidating its operations and the restaurant business has been restructured as a separate entity to position it for the next phase of its business strategy.

The Troika outlet, located near KLCC, has been closed. This outlet became a temporary home for its loyal customers when the former Equatorial outlet on Jalan Sultan Ismail was closed in 2012 to make way for a redevelopment to be known as Equatorial Plaza.

“We have to continue to serve our loyal guests who have followed the restaurant over the years. But now that the reopening of Equatorial Plaza is to take place in March, it doesn’t make sense to have two outlets located so close to each other,” says Wong.

Next month, Equatorial Plaza, where the EQ Kuala Lumpur Hotel is set to make a rebirth when it reopens, will be home to the most exclusive Kampachi restaurant in the chain.

With an investment cost of RM3mil, the group is obviously putting in a lot of effort into the reopening of the EQ outlet. The new restaurant is set to be the largest outlet for the group and is designed to be the showcase of what the restaurant has to offer – right back at the place where it all started for Kampachi.

One of the attractions at the EQ outlet will be the sushi counter which is being furnished from rare Japanese Inoki wood specially imported from Japan. Costing RM250,000, the Inoki Sushi counter at the EQ outlet is another testament of Kampachi’s unique offering in the market.

Having survived in the competitive restaurant business after 45 years is a feat worth celebrating.

But this is only the beginning of a new chapter for Kampachi. Wong says the F&B group still has the ambition to grow.

A part of this plan is to take the brand overseas, starting with the other countries in the region. Wong notes that Kampachi is able to offer different concepts depending on the location and clientele base, which will help it stand out in new markets.

“This is one of the reasons why Kampachi is being carved out from the hotel operations to be a standalone business. The expansion, however, will be done very selectively as the company emphasises on maintaining quality and consistency, which is more important than merely having more outlets,” Wong says.

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She adds that this growth plan is also the reason why its latest outlet is being positioned as the showcase outlet. As market demand continues to evolve, it is important to have a place for customers to come and see what the group has to offer across the board.

The new look will also enable Kampachi to saddle back into EQ Hotel’s new look and identity.

“Each market in a particular location is unique, so the concept has to be in line with the market that caters to different customer profiles. However, we will continue to maintain our positioning as a restaurant in the premium market segment,” says Wong.

Backed by long serving staff members, excellent training and standard operating procedures honed over four decades, Kampachi Japanese Restaurant is set to begin cooking up new chapters in its culinary journey.

TAGS / KEYWORDS:

Kampachi , F B