

# Riding out the storm

Rasel Catering Singapore's managing director Alan Tan and creative director Chris Loh make bold moves to succeed

by april chong

IT WAS not easy leaving their comfort zone as financial planners but a thirst for challenge led Mr Alan Tan, 48, and Ms Chris Loh, 40, to think beyond what they had always been doing.

After observing that there was a market demand in food catering, the duo set up catering firm Rasa Selera in 1997.

"We saw an opportunity and vacuum in halal catering, thus we got our food preparation facilities certified halal by Muis in 1999," says Mr Tan, the managing director of the firm.

In 2001, they bought a factory and expanded the business.

"As we listened to market calls, we repositioned and changed our business name to Rasel Food Fusion, in view of the fusion food fad then. We are proud that we were able to identify business opportunities and grasp them in right timing," he recalls.

In 2010, the company was renamed Rasel Catering Singapore.

## Overcoming setbacks

When the Sars outbreak caused businesses to dip in 2003, Mr Tan and Ms Loh tried many ways to keep their afloat. Not everything worked and they met with one financial setback after another.

Ms Loh, who is Rasel's creative director, shares: "It was a rollercoaster ride, but we never succumbed to failure and despair.

"On the other hand, it urged us to work harder instead and keep the business going."

The duo then put in place both internal and external action plans to combat the crisis. They included no pay leave for staff and negotiation of longer credit terms with suppliers.

After pulling out of the crisis, the company continued to differentiate itself in branding exercises.

Just this year, they revamped their business identity and are preparing for their next phase of business growth in the belief of "reinventing, rejuvenating, re-thinking, re-strategising and re-engineering".

## Taking a bold step

This year, both Mr Tan and Ms Loh are awardees of the Established Entrepreneur category in the Entrepreneur of the Year Award, which is organised by the Rotary Club of Singapore and the Association of Small and Medium Enterprises.

To them, an entrepreneur is someone who is not afraid to take a bold step.

"Others deemed our idea of setting Rasel to be crazy, and while we were shot down before the start of business, we managed to swim against the current. We stepped out of our comfort zone to pursue our dream and we believe success will only

be on its way," says Mr Tan.

The duo deciphered market needs and wants, and were able to complement each others' areas of expertise.

The road to entrepreneurship was not easy and they learnt valuable lessons along the way.

They found that while it was one thing to be fearless to succeed, there had to be a certain measure of prudence and calculated risk taking.

"Otherwise, the sustainability of a business will be threatened and can be easily forced out of the market," says Ms Loh.

They also saw that hard work also does pay off and there must always be much "homework" done to gain the appropriate insights and information before moving ahead for each step of the business.

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— Mr Alan Tan, managing director, Rasel Catering Singapore

## Staying competitive

Appreciating and valuing the people around them, especially the staff and suppliers who had weathered the difficult Sars period with them, was also one of their recipes for success.

Says Mr Tan: "Complacency will only lead to the stagnation of all growth, and therefore, one should never be self-conceited and complacent even when achievements are attained. Achievements are only past track records and they do not necessarily propagate the future."

To stay competitive and ahead of the curve, the company engages in continual research and development, and innovation in food and service to appeal to the market. This can mean an invention of a new recipe or an old recipe in a new outfit.

Being acknowledged as one of the forefront in entrepreneurship here is an encouragement for them to strive on.

"It is a recognition and testament to our hard work for the past years and it will motivate us to work harder to raise the bar in F&B catering and set the trends in catering industry.

"Always believe that one can weather the storms, and that success is inevitable," adds Ms Loh.



Mr Tan and Ms Loh learnt many valuable lessons on the road to entrepreneurship.

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