

A Taste for Giving

*Alan Tan, co-founder of the successful Rasel Catering, is constantly surrounded by good food, but **Melissa Gail Sing** discovers his insatiable appetite for serving others*

SHEPHERD'S PIE, HICKORY Norwegian salmon and meringue French Napoleon are some of the dishes Alan Tan samples on his daily rounds at his production kitchen at Pandan Loop. He loves the constant discovery of being in the food industry, but ask the managing director of Rasel Catering what his favourite food is and his answer is surprisingly simple: porridge.

It's a reminder of the entrepreneur's humble beginnings. Growing up, he shared a small bedroom with five other siblings, an early lesson on being grateful for what one has. "It teaches you treasure where you are today, to never forget your roots and the importance of having empathy for others," says the father of two sons, whom he teaches the same.

In 1997, with former colleague Chris Loh, he started Rasa Selera. The second caterer to attain halal food certification in Singapore, it was renamed Rasel Catering in 2001, reflecting a shift to an artistic approach to food. With Alan's strategic leadership and Chris' creative direction, Rasel has gone from catering mainly packed meals and for residential events from its rented premises, to feeding up to 6,000 people a day—including at government events and weddings—from its 20,000sqft factory. A year ago, the four-time recipient of the Singapore Prestige Brand Award acquired Purple Sage as its new premium, non-halal wing.

Discovering the joys of food and watching his company grow is one thing, but there's another reason why Alan considers Rasel his greatest achievement: "It has generated a safety net not only for my family but also for my team and their families. Working hand in hand, especially those who've been with us for a decade, we've taken the business this far."

Rasel's success must have something to do with his leadership style. While he makes no compromise on quality, safety standards and productivity, he emphasises values of empathy and social responsibility—by showing it first. Among his almost 100 staff are foreigners

whom he regards as family. Whether it's porridge or salmon that's served that day, everyone eats the same thing. "They may have been born in a different country but they have a good working attitude. And like my Singaporean staff, they too have families to provide for. I respect that. When staff are treated equally, they find more joy in work and feel empowered. This translates into better working relationships. Goals are met and everyone gains," he says.

For the past five years, Rasel has been closing shop for two half-days annually so staff can do volunteer work. This shaves earnings by a five-figure sum, but Alan says, "With our irregular working hours, this is a perfect way to bond. I also believe that if my staff put themselves out for others, be it the less fortunate or customers, they come to realise the vital link they are in the community and the impact they have on other lives. It touches their soft spot and when they return to work, we find that they actually do become more responsible, caring workers. I also believe there's a ripple effect that extends outside the workplace, to their personal lives with their families and communities."

Installed as the 81st president of the Rotary Club of Singapore (RCS) in June, Alan was initially apprehensive about filling the big shoes left by his predecessors, but he sees himself as a tool to continue RCS' legacy of impacting lives. In celebration of SG50, he pledged \$50,000 towards the club's community service projects, with plans for a suicide prevention and a youth mentorship programme here, rebuilding projects in Nepal, and setting up eye clinics in India. He has just returned from Malang, Indonesia where RCS supports a literacy programme for needy kids. "Seeing their excitement when they receive the stationery and books is priceless. These are everyday items to us but could create a very different future for them."

Be it delivering artistic food experiences, nurturing a team that puts others first, or changing lives through RCS, it's clear: even with a full plate, Alan is always hungry to serve. ●

PHOTOGRAPHY: LIONEL LAVACEPPI; GROOMING: BENEDICT CHOO



"During my term as Rotary Club president, I'll support at-risk youths, the less privileged, and the arts. I also hope to launch an iconic project in Singapore to leave a legacy for the club to impact the lives and hearts of future generations of Singaporeans"