



## Reuben Ang

Managing Director of Elsie's Kitchen

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*by*

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Reuben Ang knew which career path he would take, even when he was in primary school.

His family runs the food catering business, Elsie's Kitchen. Mr Ang grew up running around in a shophouse, and racing trolleys through foodcourts and canteens. Sometimes, he would help out, packing bento boxes, and in his teenage years, took on stewarding duties at catering events. When he got his driving license, he would be driving a lorry to these events.

When it came to deciding on the course of study at university, Mr Ang, now 30, chose to do a business degree, with a marketing major, at the NUS Business School. The bachelor says it was so he could join the family business, which he did in 2012.

The business was started in 1954 by Mr Ang's grandfather. Back then, it was a humble canteen in the British Royal Air Force camps. In 1986, the second generation of Angs took over and officially registered Elsie's Kitchen as a catering business. Elsie is one of Mr Ang's aunts.

Today, the third generation is running the business. Mr Ang's sister, Rachel, is the human resource director, and their cousin, Job, the director of food and beverage.

### **Did you feel obligated to join the family business?**

I have a passion for food and all things delicious and grew up in the kitchen/factory. That exposure made me want to be in the family business, but I had no idea when that would be, as I worked in a Christian ministry for a while after graduation.

My father and his siblings were getting old, and they were thinking about retiring. They talked to me taking over the business. I knew that by joining, I would be able to bring Elsie's Kitchen to another level, so why not?

### **What did you do when you came on board?**

I rebranded Elsie's Kitchen to evolve with the times. The company used to be run in a very traditional way. For example, nothing was computerised. I put in place a proper reporting structure, cashiering system and a creative team. I also pushed for automation. Now, the washing and cutting of vegetables is done by a machine, so is the cooking of rice and sauce production.

Automation helps us save on manpower. Now we can take more orders, and the food preparation is also more consistent.

Our wedding catering business is also growing. I started a creative team, and with this, we can not only customise the menu, but provide services ranging from floral arrangements to table layouts and even bespoke menu cards. We can be a one-stop shop for wedding events.

I'm also rejuvenating the brand by introducing a more innovative cuisine, to reach out to the younger market.

Elsie's Kitchen is known for its heritage food, such as laksa, nasi lemak and Muar otah. We just introduced a new menu which is a modern take on familiar foods.

**The second generation still sits on the board. Is it a case of too many cooks spoil the broth?**

My father and his four other siblings are still in the business, but they have largely given the third generation empowerment. But out of respect, I still update them on what we plan to do. They are open to ideas, but when it comes to spending money, it is only natural that they are still cautious.

Automation cost us a lot of money, but I told the second generation upfront that it is hard to find manpower and with automation, we would be more productive. They agreed with that.

Sometimes we can be arguing one minute, but the next we would be having a happy family dinner. That's the thing with working with family, we have a common purpose. We can't stop thinking or talking about work. Every meet up, outside of the factory, is a board meeting.

**What are your future plans for the company?**

We will continue to update the menu and come up with innovative dishes. It does take time, and everyone contributes ideas, and there is a lot of tweaking the flavours.

I eat out a lot, and often jot down notes on flavour profiles which we then try to recreate in the factory.

I want to continue building our creative capabilities, so that catering is no longer just setting up a buffet line. There are also plans to set up new concept food courts, kiosks, and to manufacture ready-to-eat meals. I want for us to not only be a food provider but to be a food solution company too.

**Running a catering company sounds less glamorous than having your own restaurant. What do you think?**

Being in the F&B business is nothing glamorous. But I don't feel we are different from the restaurant business. We still come up with a menu, and offer more than just food. We are still about bringing the best experience to the customer but in a different format.

**Can you cook? What would you cook to impress a girl?**

I enjoy cooking and have a large repertoire of dishes. But rather than name a dish, I would find out her preferred tastes and create a dish accordingly.

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