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Foodie Confidential

Elsie's Kitchen's Reuben Ang: More to catering than beehoon and curry chicken



Mr Reuben Ang recently introduced dishes such as rojak chicken katsu topped with fruit salad to the company's catering menu. PHOTO: DIOS VINCOY JR FOR THE SUNDAY TIMES

Reuben Ang of Elsie's Kitchen wants people to know there is more to catering than beehoon and curry chicken

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The catering sector is making great effort to jazz up its image in the food and beverage scene. Take it from Mr Reuben Ang, 30, who has grown up with catering company Elsie's Kitchen - his family's business for three generations since 1954.

Growing up, his school holidays involved packing bento sets, bussing tables for events and helping with deliveries.

"We learnt how to be responsible, although it wasn't a glamorous job," recalls the bachelor, who studied business administration at the National University of Singapore and worked in a Christian ministry for two years before joining Elsie's Kitchen's parent company Hased & Emet Holdings in 2012 as managing director.

Catering may not be glamorous, but it can make a difference. The company recently pledged to donate \$0.10 for every pax catered to Rainbow Centre, a welfare organisation which operates two schools for infants, children and youths with special needs.

As part of this corporate social responsibility initiative, Elsie's Kitchen has roped in local chefs Daniel Tay (Cat & the Fiddle), Victor Loy (Plentyfull) and Charles Tan (STRAY by Fatcat) to showcase their signature dishes for three months on the company's buffet menus from July 1, 2017. Mr Tay has created mini banana cheese tarts, Mr Loy a beef brisket tagine and Mr Tan a truffle herbal chicken. And for the three months, 100 per cent of the proceeds from these dishes will go to Rainbow Centre.

The company is named after Elsie, one of Mr Ang's aunts who is part of the business. His elder sister Rachel, 31, is the human resource director, while his cousin Job, 28, is the food and beverage director. His father, 62, supervises the company, while his mother, 58, is in charge of purchasing. His younger sister, 27, is a doctor.

Mr Ang is concerned that people associate catering with just three (rather boring) dishes: fried rice, fried bee-hoon and curry chicken. Yet, such dishes are menu staples, along with crowd favourites such as laksa, otah and kueh pie tee.

He says: "Singaporeans are adventurous diners, but they still go back to comfort food when ordering because you have to please everyone."

WHAT WOULD YOUR LAST MEAL BE?

Comfort food such as my mother's radish cake that is steamed and pan-seared. She always makes this for the first day of Chinese New Year.

I'll also have my father's sweet and sour pork, and my aunt Elsie's braised shark with salted vegetables, and vinegar pig trotters.

To move with the times, he recently introduced dishes such as rojak chicken katsu topped with fruit salad; "Kra Pao" Thai basil minced chicken bee tai mak; and Muar otah mantou sliders, served with achar relish and a dash of sambal mayonnaise - a refreshed version of the company's signature Muar otah.

Other subsidiaries under the parent company include Continental Delight, which focuses on international fusion cuisine; the soon-to-launch Muse, which offers high-end menus for private dining; and social arm The Hesed Table, which provides food for migrant workers.

Wanting to be a "one-stop solution" for events - especially weddings - the company also provides event styling, from floral decoration to customising invites.

Mr Ang is also committed to preserving the heritage flavours that Elsie's Kitchen is known for. He dedicates a few months each year to taking courses at the Asian Culinary Institute in Eunos, which focuses on Asian cooking.

He says: "Growing up, I used to cook more Western dishes such as pasta, steak and pizza. But in recent years, I've learnt to appreciate Asian cooking a lot more, especially through my work. It was the uncool thing that your parents are good at that you don't want to do.

"But now, learning to make a good sweet and sour sauce or how to toss the wok for maximum wok hei is very interesting."

Tell us some tricks of the trade in the catering business.

You can't have too many deep-fried items on the menu as the texture changes over time.

Recipes have to be modified too. For example, we wanted to do a cuttlefish and kangkong dish, but kangkong discolours very easily, so we did a kang kong tempura, which keeps the vegetable's shape and colour.

Food has to be easy to eat if we are catering canapes. Everything has to be bite-sized.

We have to be careful with barbecued items as the meat dries out very easily, so we offer them only for live station cooking. We have to be careful with the venue as well. Once, we did a wedding with a barbecue live station and, although it was outdoors, all the smoke blew into the hall - the air quality looked like it was PSI 400 and everyone smelt of smoke.

What is the first dish you cooked?

I learnt to make mashed potatoes at the age of three.

Have you had any kitchen disasters?

I was cooking Japanese curry and chicken katsu for more than 100 friends. However, the rice was not steaming and the chicken was not cooked properly. In the end, I called the Elsie's Kitchen factory for support, and everything was ready in 20 minutes. This incident taught me to have proper planning.

What are your favourite restaurants?

Middle Eastern restaurant Artichoke in Middle Road, which is good for dining in big groups and ordering sharing platters. After work, we like to go to The Refinery in King George's Avenue and GastroSmiths at Katong II2. For family gatherings, we go to Violet Oon Singapore in Bukit Timah.

Are you an adventurous diner?

My father always encourages us to try something at least once, to know whether we like it or not. I've eaten deep-fried sparrow in Shanghai, which was too bony and troublesome to eat. I also recall dining at an African-themed restaurant here, which served plenty of game meat, when I was in primary school. I remember eating zebra steak.

What is the next stop on your dining list?

The popular Song Kee Fishball Noodle, which used to be in Upper Serangoon Road and has re-opened in Joo Chiat. I went once to eat it, but was told to wait for 45 minutes. I left, planning to go at a better time.

What would you be doing if you were not in the family business?

When I graduated, I wanted to run a cafe as it was the "in" thing then. My father discouraged me as I did not understand the scene well enough. Now I see how hard it is to hire enough manpower and there are too many options for diners.

I have a wild plan to have my own food truck one day. I also wouldn't mind doing ready-to-eat meals. After all, its image is changing. People are less likely to associate it with combat rations.

If you could invite someone dead or alive for a meal, who would you pick?

My late grandmother. I don't remember much of her, but I always hear stories of her food such as economy bee-hoon and vinegar pig trotters. I would love to share with her what we do now.

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