



Right guide: Chong hopes to help people make healthier choices when it comes to food.



How it's made: A simple dehydrator is used to develop air-dried noodles.



Physically present: Chong conducts her own site inspections of her supplier's farms to ensure she gets quality products.

Crusading a nutritious lifestyle

Food maker innovates healthy foods for an on-the-go generation



Getting to know mee: The company regularly carries out sampling sessions to get consumers acquainted with its noodle products.

By ALEXANDRA WONG
starsmebiz@thestar.com.my

AS A trained biochemist, Clarissa Chong knows better than anyone else that commercial instant noodles were loaded with nasty additives. And she was faced with her greatest nightmare when her eldest daughter came home from kindergarten one day asking for instant noodles.

After a brief moment of panic, she decided that if she couldn't beat them, she'd join them.

"I had been producing quick-cooking noodles under my company Cottage Farm for a few years, so I told myself this was a good time to venture into instant noodles. If I succeeded, I could help other mothers facing similar challenges," she shares.

Many experiments later, she created a first-of-its-kind vegetarian instant noodles from all natural ingredients. Not only did it win her children's approval, the product became one of Cottage Farm's stellar performers.

The homegrown company has since launched other innovative dried food products targeted at health-conscious consumers who want delicious, easy-to-prepare and nutritionally balanced meals. Carbonara air-dried quinoa noodles or mulberry-based beverages, anyone?

Healthy beginnings

Cottage Farm started as a vegetable delivery service in 2009, inspired by a visit to organic farms in Cameron Highlands.

Looking to exit a ten-year career in the medical diagnostics industry, the idea of helping others cultivate healthy eating habits resonated with Chong, whose parents grew their own organic vegetables and educated their children on the dangers of plastic, long before the fight against plastic became a movement.

Using an online subscription model, Chong began offering a home delivery service of fresh, organically grown vegetables in Klang Valley.

"I was overjoyed to find out that children, who don't usually like vegetables, enjoyed mine because organic vegetables are sweeter," she says.

Unfortunately, her luck began to run out after three years. Small-time vegetable delivery service providers like herself were gradually squeezed out by commercial players.

Customer retention was another problem. There were always new signups but the dropout rate was very high.

"When I called them, my customers told me they would love to cook but they had no time, so they

ended up eating out."

That gave her another idea. What if she provided these time-challenged folks with a solution?

In 2011, Chong switched to noodle production. She figured that she couldn't go wrong with a food that was universally loved by Malaysians, including her own family. After identifying a certified organic supplier overseas, she linked up with a reputable food manufacturer and came up with quick-cooking noodles made from unbleached wheat flour.

When the first batch didn't do well, she tweaked the second batch to incorporate vegetables into her noodles.

"I turned to the farmers who used to supply to my vegetable delivery service. They always faced an issue with surplus harvest and they would call me from time to time asking if I could help take the load off them. Pumpkins in particular grow very fast when the weather is hot. I thought, why not kill two birds with one stone?" she says.

Her quick-cooking noodles – now available in pumpkin, spinach, seaweed and unpolished rice – were a hit.

Challenges of a mompreneur

Clarissa Chong enjoys having a free hand to develop products and make time for family

By ALEXANDRA WONG
starsmebiz@thestar.com.my

BEFORE starting up Cottage Farm, Clarissa Chong worked in quality control for a biscuit factory and, subsequently, in sales for a medical diagnostics multinational corporation. With a diverse background that spanned quality control and product development to sales and marketing, Chong was fairly confident she could successfully build a business from scratch.

She knew the dos and don'ts and was familiar with different parts of an operation.

Still, industry-related experience did not prevent her from making rookie mistakes.

The lack of a real-life experience led to tunnel vision, and a failure in her first product launch.

"I had to have a product in hand before approaching retail shops but manufacturers don't make samples. You have to order a minimum order quantity. Being new, I

was afraid to commit too much capital upfront so I decided to start with just one simple product, a plain wheat noodles made from unbleached organic flour.

"To make it look like I had a variety of products, I played with shapes and offered the noodles in spirals, shells, mee suah and flat strands," she explains.

Alas, her customers complained that her white noodles not only looked bland, they tasted that way too.

Naturally, sales didn't quite take off and Chong was forced to recall the noodles.

The painful experience taught her an important lesson: no matter how healthy it may be, a food product won't sell if the taste is below par.

Currently Chong has a team of ten employees who help her with operations, administration, sales and marketing. But in its early days, Cottage Farm was very much a one-woman show.

Every morning, Chong would fill up her car boot with bags of noodles and knock on doors of organic shops all over Klang Valley to convince them to put her noodles on their shelves. Then in the evening, she would hang around her lab to develop more products.

"My two daughters would join me and even camp overnight, until my husband came to chase us back home!"

At first, her children were excited by their mother's new venture. But the novelty eventually wore off.

"I gave up a high salary to pursue my passion. My eldest daughter, who was born before my career change, felt the lifestyle change the most. No more luxury hotels and expensive meals out, only kopitiam and mamak stalls! At one point, she wanted me to go back to employment. Then I sat down with her and gave her the pros and cons.

"I asked her, 'Do you want



Making time: Starting her own business has given Chong more time with her family.

money or do you want mummy to spend more time with you?" It took a while but she eventually chose the second option.

"I'm proud to say that my children have learned to embrace a moderate lifestyle and healthy living. They are still curious about what their friends are eating, but they are satisfied to just have a one-time try for taste.

"Lately, though, they have been asking for Korean noodles. Maybe that should be my next project,"

she laughs.

Personally, Chong thinks that pursuing her passion is the best decision she has made.

"I like this current lifestyle because I understand the value of money better. When you work for others, you spend without thinking because there is a salary guaranteed every month. I have more time with my family now while helping others to lead healthier lifestyles. What more can I ask for?"

Tapping the organic market

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"Most similar products in the market use vegetable powder or juice, which omits essential fibre. My customers loved the fact that our noodles use whole real vegetables with their nutrients and fibre intact. They are very popular with children, especially fussy eaters who love the natural sweetness that comes from fresh vegetables," Chong reveals.

Hands-on approach

While the actual production process is outsourced to a reputable food manufacturer, product development is done entirely by Chong in a modest shoplot that serves as warehouse, packing station and laboratory for Cottage Farm.

One of Chong's biggest technical challenges is striking a balance between taste and nutritional value, especially for meal replacement products where taste is contingent on "food powder" – her preferred description for seasoning packets that come with instant noodles.

Citing her initial experiment with instant noodles, she says, "Commercial instant noodles taste so good because the seasoning is made up of artificial flavourings synthesized by computer codes. You can never get the same bold, strong flavours using all natural ingredients."

Chong spent more than two years on research and development to create her inaugural vegetarian instant noodles.

"I must have walked into every shop in Brickfields searching for herbs and spices and experimented with all kinds of combinations and cooking methods.

"Shitake mushrooms, the basic



Natural ingredients: The food powder for Cottage Farm's curry instant noodles is made from beans.

ingredient of my food powder, didn't generate an intense enough flavour, so a friend suggested adding sugar to bring out a stronger taste. But being aware of the carcinogenic glycation process that takes place between sugar and amino acids, I couldn't bring myself to put in more than the bare minimum.

"In the end, I added dried carrot powder to achieve the desired sweetness," she says.

If Chong seems more hands-on than your typical business owner, you're right.

She sources every ingredient personally and goes on physical site inspections before selecting a farm as her supplier. She replicates certain processes that are carried out in the factory – such as checking noodles for chewiness – to ensure the final product lives up to expectations before it goes to market.

As a precaution, she conducts random tests on her vegetable

supplies to check for pesticide levels, even though she already commissions an industrial lab to carry out standard ingredient testing.

These additional steps are time-consuming, but they give her extra confidence in her products. In fact, Chong believes that staying true to her ethics is crucial to survival in the health food business.

"One of the things I learned while running my vegetable delivery business was that not all organic products live up to their name," she says.

"Integrity is a big thing in the health food industry. Organic food customers, particularly, are sensitive and read labels very carefully.

"At the same time, Malaysians have a trust issue about whether products are really organic as claimed. As the price for organic products can be prohibitive, consumers want to make sure they're getting their money's worth."

For Chong, it means relentlessly improving products to the point



Part of the process: While manufacturing works are outsourced, the company does everything else including packing and labelling.

where they're indistinguishable from commercial ones to encourage people to make healthier choices.

To that end, she adopts an unconventional approach. When she has devised an improved formulation of an existing product, she will recall the incumbent off the shelves and replaces them with the new version.

She believes this is the ethical way to innovate.

"If they can have something better, why should customers settle for standard products? And if my balance sheet is healthy, why not share the goodness?"

Integrity is a trump card

While her perfectionist tendency may sound like an accountant's nightmare, Chong assures that the business is doing "more than ok".

After incurring losses in the early years, revenue has climbed steadily as Chong progressively reformulated her products. From less than ten stores in its first year of operation, today, more than 70 outlets carry Cottage Farm's prod-

ucts nationwide. They include premium supermarkets like BIG, Village Grocer and Jaya Grocer.

But it took a long time to get to this stage, she admits.

"If you're in it for quick money, forget it. In this business, you must have a genuine passion for helping people to lead a healthy lifestyle."

Chong's next mission is to formulate gluten-free noodles.

"A few years ago, I saw a little boy at an organic shop in Subang looking longingly at my noodle snacks [a product Cottage Farm has discontinued]. The shop owner warned me not to let him eat it because he was allergic to gluten. When I saw the disappointment in his eyes, I told him, 'Auntie will make gluten-free noodles for you one day.'"

"It's been six years and I haven't achieved the result I want. It's difficult because the gluten is the ingredient that makes your noodles deliciously chewy, and none of the products in the market comes close.

"But watch out, I'll get there one day," she says with a gleam in her eyes.

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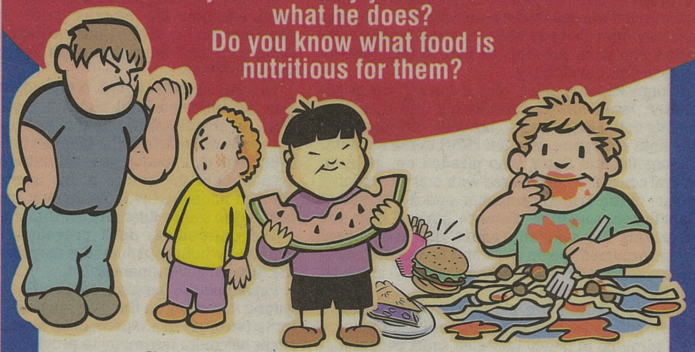
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TRAINERS



Kasthoori Naidu has been in the education industry for more than 25 years with teaching experience from primary to tertiary levels, in both public and private institutions in Malaysia.

Kasthoori has a lot of passion in the growth and development of children and strongly believes that parents play a fundamental role in shaping the future of their children. With that she has designed a program which empowers parents of the Third Millennium in raising successful children.



Clarissa Chong - founder, Cottage Farm, holds a degree from the University of Malaya in Biochemistry. Clarissa has 10 years of experience in medical diagnostics and 10 years in the food industry.

For the past 7 years, she has been involved in giving talks and having roadshows to promote healthy eating for children.

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Family 3

An organic way of life

By SHEELA CHANDRAN
 star2@thestar.com.my

LIKE many graduates, Clarissa Chong had a regular, stable job. But the biochemist who worked in the medical diagnostics industry for more than 10 years had given herself a deadline to quit and venture into business by 40. She felt that it was something she had to do or her "passion would slowly dim with time".

And so at 40, Chong resigned from her job and started her business with a capital of RM500,000.

"I've always been interested in business as my father is a digital and electronics businessman. He always encouraged me to go into business," recalls Chong, who was more excited than scared about her career change. "When the time came, I couldn't wait to leave my job in the medical field to run my own business."

It also helped that Chong knew exactly which business she wanted to go into.

"Since young, my siblings and I have been living in an organic environment. My dad – an advocate of homegrown vegetables – educated us on the toxicity of pesticides in vegetable farming, adverse effect of colouring in food and chemical leaching from plastic bottles. So, it was only natural to go into the organic food business," says Chong, who shares her parents' belief in eating healthily.

In 2010, Chong established Cottage Farm, offering a home delivery service of fresh, organically-grown vegetables in the Klang Valley.

The following year, Chong utilised her knowledge and expertise as a biochemist to develop and produce organic instant noodles, inspired by her two daughters.

"Growing up, my parents forbade my siblings and I from eating instant noodles. I raised my children the same way too. The downside was my children felt left out especially when their friends ate instant noodles in front of them. So, I decided to formulate organic instant noodles without MSG, preservatives, colouring and flavouring," explains the Universiti Malaya graduate, who took two years to develop her organic instant noodles.

To ensure the product's quality, she works closely with food manufacturers in Melaka and Perak to ensure there are no chemicals, pesticides or genetically-modified ingredients in her line of products. Organically grown vegetables – sourced from Cameron Highlands – are used in her products. Currently, she has 10 staff to help her.

Through sheer hard work and perseverance, Chong has marketed her organic products successfully at selected grocery stores and organic food chains in the Klang Valley and Penang.

In October, she will launch an



Chong is building her business on the passion for organic food that her parents instilled in her. — P. NATHAN/The Star

organic cereal range.

For the past seven years, Chong has worked hard to build Cottage Farm, putting in long hours and staying up to meet deadlines.

"There are risks involved in starting a business from scratch. You could lose a lot of money. Your products may not gain acceptance in the market. But there are always risks. I won't look back and say, 'I should have' ... I have no regrets.

"Business owners with little or no management experience may face significant challenges in run-

ning a company. I had the advantage of having a management background, from quality control to product development and marketing from my previous job experiences. This gave me the confidence to build my business."

When she gave up her job, Chong took a pay cut and had to change her lifestyle, which meant less overseas travel, fine dining and luxurious hotel stays.

"But it was not so bad since I was excited to be in business. The change in lifestyle taught me how

to value money and be prudent."

Still, Chong has no regrets making her career switch. It has helped her achieve a healthy work-family balance too.

"I can spend more time with my daughters while concentrating on my business. My daring plunge into business enabled me to rediscover my strengths and capabilities," says the 47-year-old who encourages others to venture into business.

"There is always a gap in the market's needs," says Chong.

Cultivating an organic lifestyle

Feature

Cottage Farm has not forgotten its roots as a firm believer in healthy food

By **WONG LI ZA**
metrobiz@thestar.com.my

CLARISSA Chong grew up on a diet of organically-grown vegetables fresh out of her parents' small garden patch at home in Cheras, Kuala Lumpur.

Whenever possible, Chong's parents would follow a healthy diet and lifestyle, something which has rubbed off on Chong and her two siblings.

"We understood and felt strongly about the benefits of organic food from young. However, due to our busy schedules and growing family (she and her siblings eventually got married and had children), we were not able to grow enough vegetables for our own consumption, so we started buying organic produce," she said.

However, getting a variety of good organic foods on a regular basis was not easy. She also knew of friends and relatives who needed organic food to enhance their lives, especially those stricken with ailments.

"I tried looking for a company that could deliver a regular supply of organic produce on a weekly basis but could not find one that met my needs, so I decided to start my own company," said the 41-year-old biochemist by training.

The Universiti Malaya graduate established Cottage Farm in 2010 and started by offering a home delivery service of fresh, organically-grown vegetables.

About a year later, she ventured into dried foods, all produced as closely 100% organic as possible. Working closely with a food manufacturer, she makes sure there are no chemicals, pesticides nor genetically-modified ingredients in her line of products.

"I felt that there was a demand for organic instant noodles as people led busy lifestyles and had less time to prepare proper meals at home," said Chong, who worked in the medical diagnostics industry for over 10 years before starting up her company.

Chong specifically developed noodle varieties that met essential nutritional needs such as Organic Seaweed Calcium Noodles, Organic Spinach Noodles (rich in iron for growing children), Organic Pumpkin Noodles and Gypsum-Free Organic Beancurd.

These products are currently distributed at leading organic retail outlets, grocery shops and major supermarkets in the Klang Valley.

Chong also gives back to society by working with Makna, the National Cancer Council Malaysia, contributing an average of 10% of the company's sales to the organisation.

"When I started Cottage Farm, my aim was also to help cancer patients lead a better quality of life. We want to



Hands-on: Chong packing up vegetables for delivery.

help Makna bring in more funds for the patients as cancer treatment is costly, let alone the organic diet they may want to follow. Through these fund raising projects, we also hope to educate and bring awareness to the community about leading an organic lifestyle," she said.

The mother of two girls aged four and seven is also naturally concerned about healthy eating in children.

"There is a need to reach out to children who are exposed to a lot of snacks with preservatives and inorganic colouring," she said.

Her company recently launched a ready-to-eat organic snack noodle called Pop Pop Mee, formulated with four to five times less salt and 25% less oil.

"Salt is very hazardous to children's development, especially to their kidney. We hope to encourage mothers to choose nutritious snacks for their children and to eat whole foods."

Currently, the entrepreneur is looking into developing instant functional foods that can be prepared easily by mothers. Functional food is defined as foods that provide certain health benefits beyond basic nutrition.

In the long-run, she aims to raise awareness among children themselves about healthy eating.

"Education is essential. In line with our vision, we also offer education through our Farm to School Project to increase fruit and vegetable consumption among students," she shared.

Under the project, the company gives talks at schools and kindergartens, focusing on promoting wholesome foods. It also arranges nature farm visits to introduce the process of organic farming and to connect children back to nature.

"The project also acts as a catalyst to combat childhood obesity by encouraging them to bring healthier snacks to school, including fruits and vegetables. My aim is to positively impact our children's present and future health," she said.

For more details about cottage farm, go to www.cottagefarm.com.my or write to info@cottagefarm.com.my.



All smiles: Chong is working to improve the quality of daily meals.



Natural tastes: Some of the dried snacks and noodle products from Cottage Farm.



Fresh produce: Organic vegetables offered by Cottage Farm.

Advertorial

The 23rd Malaysia Plastic, Mould & Die Exhibition, Malaysia Packaging Machinery Exhibition & Malaysia Food Processing & Bakery Equipment Exhibition will be held from 19th – 22nd July, 2012 at Putra World Trade Centre (PWTC), Kuala Lumpur.

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23rd Malaysia International Machinery Fair Press Conference on 3rd July 2012.
(From left to right: General Manager of Eevent, Datn Fang; President of Fruit Farmers Association of KL & Selangor, Jeffrey Choong; Fourth from the left: Managing Director of Eevent, Dato Chong Chong Tik; General Secretary of MACITA, WT Low; Project Manager of Eevent, May Chin)

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