

Beyond Good Taste and Prompt Service

Malaysians are a discerning bunch when it comes to food and hence F&B operators are paying close attention to what they are dishing out.

By SL Beh



Purple Cane@The Shore Shopping Gallery

Trends come and go and that statement accurately applies to what we eat and drink today. Over the years, food and beverage (F&B) trends have swept across Malaysia with the likes of bubble teas, cupcakes, boat noodles and popcorn becoming a staple fare among local diners.

As our culinary whims and fancies can be as fickle as our choice of attire, it can be a daunting task for restaurateurs to keep up with diners' fast-changing wants while sustaining a business. Globally, New York-based restaurant consulting group Baum and Whiteman predicts that the top F&B trends for 2015 include technology-based restaurant service, changes in the tastes of basic flavours, and the introduction of new elements to "authentic" dishes.

On the tech front, more F&B players are expected to experiment with mobile devices which enables diners to

order food and drinks from their tables, ask for a refill from the bar and then pay with their smartphones. The crux of introducing technology to the F&B scene is to reduce the responsibilities of the wait staff, thus allowing them to focus on getting meals faster from the kitchen to the table. That means, tables turn faster by eliminating downtime and customers get to enjoy their meals without having to go through the hassle of complaining about bad service to the managers.

Moving from surroundings to taste, 2015 could see how F&B players push the boundaries of how we feel about familiar flavours we have become accustomed to. Having chuckled at the sight of nasi lemak gelato and cempedak curry puffs, do expect to see more bizarre sounding food and drinks coming your way.

Restaurateurs may have their hands full by introducing new dishes to attract new customers while keeping their

regulars happy but many of them are fixed on improving the basics of running an F&B business before tackling fancy trends.

What Are Malaysians Eating?

When it comes to food, Malaysians like to have an abundance of variety on the menu. These choices extend beyond standard offerings and goes onto seeing more restaurants dishing out more than one cuisine. It is common to see burgers plated alongside curry noodles, served with a side of fries.

PKPS Sdn Bhd managing director Peter Ng says although Pat Kin Pat Sun Cafe starting out as a casual Western cafe, the group has today evolved into a Hong Kong-styled cafe, serving up dim sum, chicken chops and rice dishes.



Peter Ng

“Our business direction is into the mass market and our target customers range from students, the business crowd, families and the elderly. Having a variety of cuisines and dishes allows them to converge under one roof and yet be able to enjoy their favourite food,” he explains. Though the cafe’s Chinese fare has a higher following compared to its Western dishes, variety in this sense also include having more than just the main course.

“We noticed that our customers are not too portion conscious but want more than just a main and drinks. If they are having fried rice, for example, they are likely to order an additional plate of vegetables or spare ribs to go along with it. That is why set meals do well as it provides many items for only one price,” adds Ng.

That said, having too many items on the menu can be a strain on the kitchen as they would need to stock up on more items and require a bigger space for preparation. Having an idea of what sells and what doesn’t helps restaurateurs to identify likely winning dishes to introduce to their diners.

On the higher end of the market, those who value quality over quantity are now willing to fork out more to savour the best. “Diners these days are trending towards food quality. They do not mind paying for good quality and have their expectations met,” explains Rotol Food-chain director Caleen Chua who runs Chakri Palace and also Rainforest Bistro.

Quality dishes often mean the use of fresh ingredients, meticulous preparation and cooking styles, presentable plating, high level of service from wait staff and also a comfortable and cosy dining environment.

Regulars to any restaurant tend to order their usual favourites and are unlikely to try new items on the menu. For Chakri Palace, the mieng kham; a traditional Thai-style salad is a dish that is ordered by many of its patrons.



Caleen Chua

Social Status

However, diners can be fussy about dining in the same atmosphere over and over again. “In 2014, we decided to revamp our Suria KLCC outlet. While the outlet featured authentic Thai furnishing, the previous interior did not feel current,” explains Chua.

Chua's sentiments are very well in tune with diners who want to enjoy a meal at a trendy place which they would be proud to feature on their social media accounts such as Instagram. Let us not forget that these days when a dish arrives on the table, it is very likely to be photographed from various angles even before the diners take their first bite.

"We are now looking at revamping our menu to go along with our new interior. A revamped menu means improving on the quality and presentation of the food to fit the new look," she adds.

Comfort Food

That said, dining out is a common practice among urbanites who generally do not have the time to prepare a home-cooked meal. As such a practice is no longer considered to be a luxury, F&B players are seen trying to replicate comfort food lovingly made by the family's matriarch.

"People these days are dining out more compared to many years ago. While they may enjoy lavish cuisines during the week, some would like to balance that out with a light meal," explains Purple Cane Tea Restaurant F&B manager Koh Choon Hong.

The tea restaurant is synonymous with the concept of tea cuisine where all their dishes from appetisers to desserts are infused with tea. Koh says tea-infused dishes enable diners to overcome the feeling of bloatedness after eating too much.



Koh Choon Hong

Items such as the lei cha, also known as thunder tea rice which is served with tofu, vegetables and a tea broth, is well received by its diners. Also, the restaurant's herbal

soups, which are infused with tea and served in teapots, have proved to be more than a novelty as Koh points out that almost every table at the restaurant is sure to order a serving.

"We were initially afraid that the market was not able to accept such a simple palate. Malaysians are known to love their rich and strong flavours but we were pleasantly surprised by the encouraging response," says Koh.

In line with its easy and casual dining concept, Koh says all their meat dishes are served without bones as it allows diners to enjoy their meal fuss-free, without having a massive pile of bones in front of them at the end of the meal.

"It is a common misconception that only the older generation favours what is deemed as bland flavours but our restaurant is seeing more young diners ranging from students to the office crowd," observes Koh.

Their tea-cuisine strategy did help the brand to promote its core business of selling tea as all of its eight restaurants feature an area to sell their products such as tea leaves and tea pots. "After a meal, diners will usually open up to the idea of not just drinking tea but also in the art of making tea. It is only normal for them to want to take home some tea products to replicate the experience they had in our restaurant," he says.

A Quick Bite

On the other hand, good food these days can be found anywhere and in any portion. Those looking for something lighter opt to visit kiosks and food stalls to grab a quick bite. "When you are selling snacks from a kiosk, the scent of the product plays an important part in attracting buyers," explains Koh, as to how they are able to sell over 100,000 herbal tea eggs a year at 25 of its retail outfits.

According to Koh, shoppers looking for a light snack would often buy an egg or two when they walk pass the store. He attributes the scent of boiling eggs as a trigger for his customers' impulsive purchase urges. This quick-fix scenario also extends to snacks such as gourmet popcorn which has seen growing interest among urban shoppers. Planetpop Marketing Sdn Bhd managing director Alvis

Koh, who runs Planet Popcorn, believes Malaysians are ready to accept popcorn as a common snack as opposed to the previous notion that the snack is only good for cinemas.



Alvis Koh

“Overseas, especially in the US, popcorn is a common snack and we have seen the market becoming more receptive of our products over the years,” he says. The brand Planet Popcorn originates from Taiwan and has been around since 2011. Koh started the business during the time when an influx of Taiwanese F&B brands flooded the local market. While popcorn is usually associated with sweet flavours such as caramel, Koh adds that Oriental flavours such as kimchi, curry and seaweed are also picking up in terms of sales.

“Our sales can easily increase by up to 30% during festive seasons or school holidays. That is why for a kiosk business to sustain, you need to be in a location with a high footfall,” he says. Though snacks are generally associated with empty calories and low quality, Koh is adamant that using high quality maize imported from the US, which are free from genetically modified organisms (GMO), does help change customers’ perception.

“Common snacks such as potato chips and prawn crackers tend to be high in calorie content as they are deep-fried. Our signature cooking method of using high temperature allows us to pop our maize by using less oil. Snacks are never healthy but we try our best to make it less harmful to our customers,” he quips.

Meanwhile, Chua of Rotol says her latest offering - Hwan by Chakri Palace - a kiosk serving Thai favourites such as mango sticky rice, pandan chicken and coconut ice cream, is gaining momentum among passersby. “Consumers need time to understand our brand as we are not introducing a new product but are venturing into a new segment,” she explains.

According to Chua, running a kiosk is different from running a full-fledged restaurant and adjustments have to be made to maximise the resources within a limited

space. “We are now looking to bottle the sauces from our popular restaurant dishes such as the fried garoupa in tiga rasa sauce and make them available at our kiosks,” she adds.

Trending into Sustainable Operations

There is a need for one to convert trends into culture in order to survive the changing tides of fads. Planet Popcorn’s Koh explains that Malaysians with spending power are typically from the Generations X, Y and Z. “They are always looking for something new, special or different to try. Without any trends, it would be difficult to popularise a product,” reveals Koh.

In developing a food culture around a product, he stresses the importance of being in the right location while creating a sense of scarcity. Having too many locations in this instance could increase the risk of a trend dying a quick death by oversaturating the brand.

“In order to create a culture, I sell my popcorns at shopping malls that have heavy retail footfall. These malls are usually those that are well known and have a pull factor that is able to create a need for shoppers or diners to patronise these malls. When shoppers see your brand at these locations, they will presume that your brand is relevant to the market and it then becomes the top-of-mind selection when they are keen to purchase,” explains Koh.

Marketing to the Right Target Audience is Key

It is clear that Malaysians can be as discerning or as casual when it comes to food choices. The abundance of choices in the local F&B scene only makes it harder for a particular cuisine to stand out and make a name for itself.

That said, F&B trends are essential to keep the industry growing alongside the passing of time. The higher the competition, the harder a F&B brand works to satisfy the wants of its customers. Ultimately, good food sells but marketing them to the right target audience can help ensure the sustainability of the business. What’s a good product if nobody knows about it anyway? 🍿