

# Topped off with a garnish of innovation

Caterer Orange Clove constantly differentiates itself by coming up with novel ideas to keep things fresh for its clients. **BY FIONA LAM**

**F**OR award-winning corporate caterer Orange Clove Catering, the recipe for success goes beyond simply dishing up good food. Certainly, food quality will always be paramount for the mid to high-end caterer. Each of its dishes is

**Mr Lee unveiling the caterer's latest innovation – a portable conveyor belt. PHOTO: ARTHUR LEE**

prepared by only one chef, unlike other caterers which assign a team of chefs to cook all the dishes, Orange Clove's executive director Elvis Lee says.

The company, a subsidiary of Neo Group, also controls its food quality by importing its own ingredients and preparing its food an hour before the event, so as to keep the food fresh. However, Orange Clove yearns to be far more than "just a food delivery man", Mr Lee says. Its secret sauce, he says, lies in innovation. He constantly tells his team to "differentiate or die". Its latest innovation is a portable conveyor belt, which serves both Japanese food and canapés at events. Unveiled some weeks ago at an event for Google, the conveyor belt idea was born after Google had nudged Orange Clove for something new.

"Our clients are always asking for novelty because they order from us so often; otherwise, they'll get tired of our offerings," Mr Lee says. Corporate clients may engage Orange Clove as frequently as once a week. So far, the seven-year-old caterer has, among other things, introduced new menus, started a dedicated arm for weddings, and launched a food truck named Captain 500.

In particular, launching the food truck was an industry first, Mr Lee says. Orange Clove also joined the Health Promotion Board's Healthier Dining Programme in February – hence the low-calorie meals of up to 500 kcals served by the food truck. As the caterer rides on the trend of healthier eating, it is also bringing whole-grain options into its menus. Brown rice and wholemeal sandwiches will be among its additions. "Even our signature curry chicken from our parent company will be skinless and contain pasteurised milk instead of coconut milk," Mr Lee says.

Determined not to stagnate and become complacent, the company sent a team earlier this month to Las Vegas to attend the Catersource Conference and Tradeshow, to learn from other industry players, get inspiration and look for new trends.

Orange Clove is also taking a bite into the event management market. It is expanding to become a one-stop, complete event solution. "We already have a team to conceptualise and execute an entire event, from the sound system to the programme, with the food of course coming from Orange Clove," Mr Lee says. It has started taking orders this year for its event management services.

Aside from innovation, another key ingredient in Orange Clove's growth is its personalised service. Since 2012, it has been assigning dedicated account managers to each of the 20 business sectors in which it has clients. This means that every sales staff has a thorough understanding of the requirements and preferences specific to the sector that he handles.

After this model was introduced, business has grown "very quickly", Mr Lee says with pride. Orange Clove has also been appointed a pre-

**"Our clients are always asking for novelty because they order from us often."**

**Mr Lee**



ferred caterer for clients including Google, CapitaLand and Singapore Expo.

The strategy also gives his sales staff a sense of ownership and responsibility over their sectors, thus motivating them to do well. In fact, Orange Clove's human resource management style has helped with its staff retention. For one thing, it offers clear career paths. A salesperson who hits sales targets and has good conduct can expect a promotion every two years. And as Orange Clove grows, the increase in career opportunities also motivates the staff. "Work is tough, yes, but they know the future is bright," Mr Lee says.

For Irene Ong, assistant business development manager at Orange Clove, the exposure that she gets is also a plus point. In the two years that she has been employed there, she has travelled to China, Taiwan, the Philippines, Indonesia and the US for work. Ms Ong also attests to Mr Lee's efforts to keep employees' spirits up. For instance, he goes on weekly runs with them and often attends Orange Clove's events to support his staff.

Even the delivery men have chances for career progression, she says, thanks to the "elite" team started by Mr Lee which better-performing staff can be nominated into. Being part of the team means receiving higher pay and handling more important events.

As a result, Orange Clove's staff turnover stays low, in contrast to the high rate typical of the F&B sector. As the team expands, there "practically has not been any leakage", Mr Lee says. Last year, only about 5 per cent of his employees left the company.

The caterer's efforts to differentiate itself have not gone unnoticed. In 2014 alone, it received three awards, including Best Caterer at the Epicurean Star Awards by the Restaurant Association of Singapore.

It also saw a year-on-year 50 per cent growth in its number of guests served in FY2014, thanks to more companies engaging it for large-scale events. Today, events with 500-1,000 guests are common for the caterer. Last year, it catered its largest event: SIM-RMIT University's degree conferment and awards ceremony, which saw 9,940 attendees.

It is little surprise, then, that it sees other caterers as nary a threat. Unlike its competitors, Orange Clove takes a holistic approach by focusing on food quality, innovation, service and presentation, Mr Lee says.

In terms of his outlook for corporate catering, Mr Lee expects demand to remain strong in what he dubs a "sun-rise industry", and is hence looking to expand his team further. He has also identified a trend of companies setting up their own event spaces – such as seminar rooms and auditoriums – in their buildings, instead of holding events at hotels. He believes that this will benefit caterers like Orange Clove, and give hotels a run for their money.

For now, there is no end in sight for Orange Clove's growing appetite for success. This year, it expects its

number of orders to increase at least 30-50 per cent, while it works on its wedding catering arm and event management services.

After all, the ambitious caterer wants to be "a thousand steps ahead of competitors", Mr Lee says. And even then, it looks like it will be staying hungry for a while. [fionalam@sph.com.sg](mailto:fionalam@sph.com.sg)