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TWO'S COMPANY WITH SALADSTOP!'S DANIEL AND ADRIEN DESBAILLETS

Swiss-born Singapore residents expand SaladStop! to Seoul and Barcelona

From their first salad eatery in Marina Square, father and son have expanded to 19 outlets in Singapore and almost 20 in Asia

BY JOHN LUI

THE STRAITS TIMES



On top of chicken rice, curry puffs and kaya, Singapore can add to its list of culinary exports the salad and the wrap.

These very non-Asian creations, given an Asian twist, took root in Singapore eight years ago under co-founders Adrien Desbaillets and his father Daniel.

Today, there are 19 SaladStop! outlets across the island, 12 in the Philippines, three in Jakarta and four in Tokyo. The first Seoul outlet opens next month and around the same time, so will the first non-Asian location, in Barcelona, Spain.

When one thinks of foods likely to be hot sellers, fried chicken and ice cream come to mind, never salads.

What's even more remarkable about the SaladStop! success story is it grew out of Singapore, where hawker food can earn Michelin stars and a good \$5 lunch is usually around the corner.

The top roles in the company are a family affair. Adrien Desbaillets, 36, president, oversees operations. Daniel, 67, director and chairman, handles finances. Sister Katherine Desbaillets Braha, 34, handles marketing and her husband, the Paris-born Frantz Braha, 39, is business development manager, spearheading franchising operations overseas.

The Desbaillets are Swiss citizens who put down roots in Singapore 22 years ago. Everyone in the family, including Mr Braha, is a permanent resident here. Daniel, wife Eleonore, 63, a housewife, and their two children, Adrien and his sister Katherine, went wherever Daniel's job as a hotel executive took him - North America, Asia, Africa. Son and daughter graduated from the local United World College before going to Cornell University in the United States.

Adrien was working in China for a hotel investment company when the economic shocks following the 2008 financial meltdown put him on the retrenchment list.

He came back to Singapore with a plan for a chain of nutrition-conscious, quick-service restaurants.

"My dad and I said, 'Let's do something together,'" says Adrien.

We are at his One George Street outlet, fitted out in the soothing corporate scheme of blond wood and pale green.

Health and wellness posters and murals adorn the walls, testifying to the chain's use of fresh vegetables, sourced as locally and sustainably as possible, and the use of hormone-and antibiotic-free chicken.

The concept was born of a personal grouse. Adrien says that the affordable, wholesome and nutritious were three options rarely found together in one meal in 2009. Expats like him, he guessed, were "craving a good salad".

"There was nothing like what we are offering," he says. Sandwiches were available, but they were not to his taste.

His father mortgaged his apartment in Thomson Road and put his savings in with his son's to open the first store in Marina Square.

"There were a lot of people who doubted that this would work," says Adrien, because it seemed foolhardy to bank on just the expat dollar. For the concept to work, father and son knew it needed to have local appeal.

That meant overcoming two biases: That salads are neither filling nor tasty.

Corporate chef Tony Tan worked with the Desbaillets for six months to come up with ideas such as chilli crab dressing (Oh Crab Lah!) and combos with Mediterranean and Western flavours for the taste appeal; the Indian-and Japanese-themed combos feature noodles, potato and tofu. Later, the warm grain bowls and wraps, with bulgur wheat and quinoa, were added.

To take care of the "not filling" perception, proteins such as roast chicken, tandoori chicken, salmon, egg and tuna are available and portions are generous.

The Marina Square outlet enjoyed a nice weekday lunch crowd, but otherwise, business was slow. It was an ominous start. But then more outlets opened in the Central Business District (CBD). Traffic at those restaurants was strong and steady.

"We actually signed contracts with three locations before we opened the first. You can imagine how confident we were that this was going to work," Adrien says.

Expats formed the majority of customers as everyone had predicted.

"It's interesting. We started with 80 to 90 per cent expats. These days, it 50 to 60 per cent local," he says.

That flip can be credited to the menu and also to larger social trends, such as rising incomes and a greater awareness of issues such as fitness, nutrition and food safety, say father and son.

Daniel adds that by 2010, cash flow improved to the point where they were breaking even. Their formula - aggressive growth to take advantage of scale, locations around the CBD and ethical food philosophy - was paying off.

Mother's cooking an inspiration

All overseas locations have more or less the same core combos, but franchise holders modify them to suit local preferences.

In Japan, for example, the heat level in the Thai dressing is lowered. Restaurants in the Philippines offer the Sunshine Manila mix, which has brown rice. In Spain, customers can opt for flavoured olive oils.

Adrien is married to Ho Renyung, 31, co-founder and managing director of Matter, a socially conscious clothing company.

She is the daughter of former Nominated Member of Parliament Claire Chiang and executive chairman of resorts company Banyan Tree Holdings Ho Kwon Ping. Adrien and Ho Renyung have no children.

Adrien and his sister Katherine were raised on mother Eleonore's home cooking. Her food emphasised non-processed foods and nutrition, coupled with an adventurous palate shaped by the family's frequent moves.

Her influence can be felt in the SaladStop! menu.

"We call her Chief Inspiration Officer," says Adrien.

There is a test kitchen in Bukit Batok exploring new menu items. The operational headquarters is an office in Pagoda Street with 14 employees. Adrien and his brother-in-law Frantz are frequently on the road, but when Adrien is in town, he and Daniel work together almost every day.

In Singapore, the next stage of growth will be technology-driven. The chain's mobile app is not just a loyalty-points system. For the 25 per cent of customers who use it on a daily basis, it could, for example, be used to send targeted offers based on personal habits, says Adrien.

He and the family team are busy preparing for the launch of a service that he hopes will transform the way people order food.

Soon, when you order a meal a few hours in advance from SaladStop!, or a restaurant partner such as The Soup Spoon, the food will be sent to a chilled Freshbox food locker in your office building.

"There is huge potential here. Once the logistics are sorted, it can be easily scaled up.

"Everything we do in the healthy food space can now be scaled up and have a wide impact," he adds.

Adrien Desbaillets on Daniel Desbaillets

Pushing and pulling each other

"It took a bit of time for us, at the beginning, to get used to each other's style as father and son," says Adrien.

But the founders of SaladStop! have an "open relationship, based on trust" and they get along very well, he says.

Adrien appreciates his father's years of experience in the hospitality business - after all, his father was, at one time, president of InterContinental Hotels Asia Pacific.

While the older Desbaillets brings with him a lifetime of experience, it is still experience gained "in the corporate environment", not the start-up scene.

"I was 29 at the time, ready to take a lot more risk, I was ready to go all out," he says of their start-up phase and their differences.

If the business had gone bust, the younger man could have just gone back to work in China, which he sees as "the land of opportunity".

But for the older man, the money at risk was his retirement nest egg and the mortgage on his home and so he might have been, understandably, more restrained in risk-taking, says Adrien.

There was some "stepping on each other's toes" at the start-up stage over roles and responsibilities, but that worked itself out over time. For example, on food offerings, Adrien saw himself as a typical millennial, closer in personality to their typical customer working in the Central Business District and took the lead on the menu.

His father, because of his operational expertise and contacts in Singapore, made sure the expenses and cash flows were structured in such a way as to drive growth. If a menu item was not selling, his father would recommend cutting it sooner than Adrien would.

Adrien admits he had a tendency to keep the item on the menu for longer as he had poured so much effort into developing it.

Together, they complement each other: The passionate risk-taker and the pragmatic financial officer.

"It was perfect. We would push each other and pull each other back," says Adrien.

Daniel Desbaillets on Adrien Desbaillets

There's no better relationship

In a standard family business, the child is groomed for leadership and takes a subordinate role until the time is right for ascension.

At SaladStop!, father and son are co-founders. Is it hard for either one to work as partners and colleagues? Won't a lifetime of one being senior to the other make for an awkward working relationship?

Daniel Desbaillets does not think so.

"I could not have a better relationship. I wish all family businesses could be like ours. Son and father can get along and listen to each other," he says.

Both are co-founders and this meant that from the start, lines were clearly marked and there was none of the "father overriding son" dynamic found in family operations, he says.

The older man used to be involved in operations at the start-up stage, but over time, Adrien, Katherine and Frantz have taken over those roles, while he confines himself to finances.

He is as emotionally invested in Adrien's vision of an ethical food business with global reach as Adrien and the other family members, he adds.

Daniel says that on top of that, he adds an overlay of financial prudence.

"I take calculated risks. We don't work just on fantasies. You invest because you know the profit margins and returns on investment will happen in a certain period of time. And if you get all the details right at the beginning, you are bound to be successful," he says.

Staying passionate about a company's vision, while also listening to what the balance sheets say, is a skill he honed over decades working in large corporations.

"In my career, working for other hotel companies, that was my philosophy," he says.

When that philosophy is in place, most decisions - such as in hiring or negotiating with landlords and suppliers - become straightforward. The numbers guide the decision, he says.

"I am passionate about the concept. You need to be. I would not have put my money into it if I were not."