

A passion for food

■ By CHAN SEET FUN

He almost missed his calling because of mis-guided macho pride.

Mr Alson Teo, 34, chief executive officer of Stamfler Food Management, wanted to take up home economics in school, but embarrassment stood in the way.

He said: "Had I been more courageous, I would have taken Home Ec in Sec 3. I wanted to learn how to make *ondeh-ondoh* and curry puffs. But I thought, what if my friends said: 'Look at that *ah-gua* (effeminate man)!' So I picked Technical instead."

That turned out to be a bad move because he soon discovered he was hopeless at it.

"When my teacher graded my work, he always asked if he had given me the wrong diagram because what I made never looked like what I was supposed to make," he said, adding

that not surprisingly, he failed the subject.

He learnt his lesson and gave himself a second chance by enrolling in Shatec.

He then worked his way up at a restaurant chain clearing and washing plates.

"When I was asked to take orders, it was a promotion. Working there helped me learn what a restaurant is really like. I enjoyed it. I believe you must have passion for your work," he said.

Starting young

His passion for the food service industry was evident when he was nine years old.

He convinced five friends living in his Toa Payoh Lorong 5 block to each pay him 30 cents for a fried egg at his

makeshift restaurant. And there was a catch — they had to supply him with eggs.

"But I provided a tablecloth, knives, forks and ketchup. I arranged everything. I even took flowers from my mother's kitchen to decorate the table," he reasoned.

At age 11, the young restaurateur branched out into door-to-door sales.

He earned \$1.20 for eight hours of work each day, hawking *soon kueh* from a basket along the corridors in Toa Payoh.

"I kept 20 cents and gave my parents \$1. Sometimes, if sales were bad, I ended up eating 20 *soon kuehs*. But it was good exposure for me. My parents were supportive, making chilli sauce, at their own

cost, to enhance my sales. It worked," he recalled.

Rapid growth

These days, the sales figures he is accustomed to are quite different.

Group turnover was close to \$20 million last year and Mr Teo anticipates that the figure will hit \$23 million or \$24 million this year.

He set up Raffles' Choice in 1997. Due to copyright issues, he had to change the name to Stamfler, a contraction of Stamford Raffles, in 2001.

Stamfler serves 50,000 meals a day and runs 26 cafeterias at the premises of its client companies, which include Seagate and Hewlett-Packard.

It also caters for special events such as inter-

national sporting meets, music award ceremonies and corporate functions. Staff strength currently stands at 450.

In three weeks' time, Mr Teo will be launching a new 6,000 sq ft (557 sq m) food court called Burp at Alexandra Technopark.

He will also launch a new brand, *Fostre*, to handle wedding banquets, theme parties and other private functions.

Also in the pipeline are plans to go regional next year, particularly to China.

"I think it's fated that I'm in the food business. I'm happy to do something that I'm interested in. I am not good at anything else.

"At home, my wife screams at me because it takes me a long time

just to figure out how to change a light bulb," he said.

He also noted that being an entrepreneur means being prepared to make sacrifices and to juggle family and work commitments.

The father of three young children used to work 12 to 14 hours a day, every day, but has cut that down to six days a week.

Inner drive

"You must have an inner drive, a hunger to excel in things you believe in. You cannot fake it. Every day, you will face obstacles. You must have the stamina to make your dreams come true.

"There is no easy way out. It's really up to you to make a difference.

Don't blame the whole world. It's going to be a long journey," he said.

And like the Singapore football team, he has set himself a big goal for 2010.

He said: "It's my dream to create a Singapore brand name that is as big and recognisable as Starbucks."



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— Mr Alson Teo (right), CEO, Stamfler Food Management