



WEAVING HER OWN STORY

NG LEE CHIN GIVES US A TOUR OF
HER BIRD'S NEST ENTERPRISE

Written by **Susanna Lim** Photography by **Brandon Eu**

Long considered one of the most beneficial tonics in traditional Chinese medicine, bird's nest has been used for a variety of health benefits for centuries, hardly ever wavering in popularity. Produced by the saliva of swiftlets, nests are woven traditionally in caves or these days, in farming houses, and are then harvested for consumption.

We sit down with Ng Lee Chin, founder of Yan Society, to find out more about her bird's nest business, and the challenges as well as the rewards of leaving her corporate job to start a business.

HOW DID YOU DECIDE TO START YOUR ENTERPRISE?

I had been looking for the right opportunity to go into business and I realised almost all my options were related to food and health. So when the opportunity to venture into bird's nest presented itself, it was an easy decision. It was however, something that I had to think hard about since I would be leaving the security of a stable income and successful corporate career. With the support of my family, I boldly decided to take the plunge. Doing something I enjoy is important and it helps that I really enjoy consuming bird's nest.

WHAT'S THE PROCESS OF PRODUCING BIRD'S NEST PRODUCTS LIKE?

It starts with the salting of raw materials (nests) which we source from farming houses across Malaysia, including Pahang, Kelantan and Selangor. We use house nests instead of cave

nests, which generally contain less impurities and are more hygienic. Many old buildings are converted into swiftlet farm houses with a conducive environment for the nests.

Our target is eight to ten pieces a day, but if our employees do more, we provide them with an incentive. Once they clean and remove feathers from the nest, we have a team for filling, moulding, drying and then packaging the products, which include ready-to-drink bird's nest, premium concentrated bird's nest and whole piece bird's nest.

WHAT PART OF THE BUSINESS IS MOST REWARDING?

When your customers say your product is good. We normally sell to people who regularly consume bird's nest, so when they tell us about our products in comparison to other bird's nest products in the market, we're happy to get their feedback. We also provide opportunities for single mothers which is very rewarding.

HOW WOULD YOU DESCRIBE YOUR PERSONALITY, AND DOES IT AFFECT THE WAY YOU MANAGE YOUR WORK?

My friendly demeanour has helped me get along with people. It's enabled me to foster better relationships, opening doors and creating opportunities, and managing expectations. The art of managing people and effective communication has gone a long way



in helping me in my life and career. Every day it guides me in how I deal with people: family, employees, customers and business partners.

Trust is the building block of any meaningful and lasting relationship. In my company, I try to create a friendly yet productive working atmosphere where employees feel a sense of belonging and are able to speak up with any ideas or issues they may have.

WHO WERE YOUR ROLE MODELS, BOTH WHEN YOU WERE YOUNGER, AND WHEN YOU WERE STRIKING OUT ON YOUR OWN?

My eldest brother was my role model during my younger days and he still is today. He's always guiding me, giving me sound advice and is supportive in whatever I do. I definitely consulted him in my deliberations of this as well as other ventures.

WHEN YOU FIRST STARTED OUT, HOW MANY STAFF DID YOU HAVE IN COMPARISON TO NOW? AS THE STAFF GREW, HOW DID YOU MANAGE THEM?

My company started off with 10 staff members and eventually grew to around 20, so we're still a cosy unit. The number is small enough that I'm able to know them all by name and each of their interests.

Taking a leaf from my corporate days, I set the team clear targets and have SOPs in place, which I believe is one of the key reasons we are ISO 22000 and HACCP certified.



WHAT WAS THE MOST SURPRISING THING YOU DISCOVERED WHILE RUNNING YOUR OWN ENTERPRISE?

I have less free time than when I had a corporate job. I thought that I would have more time to do things, but running your own business means that there is always something that needs your attention.

WHAT WERE SOME CHALLENGES YOU CAME ACROSS WHEN STARTING OUT AND HOW DID YOU WORK THEM OUT?

People – for most companies, the key to success or failure is in who you have and how they perform. I try to build a transparent and harmonious working environment. There will always be one person that requires extra attention and they need to be attended to promptly before they affect the rest of the team.

HOW DID PEOPLE FIRST REACT WHEN YOU TOLD THEM YOU WERE PURSUING A CAREER IN ENTERPRISE?

I obtained positive feedback from friends and associates. They were supportive of my venture and generally told me I would do well in such a pursuit.

HOW DID YOU DECIDE ON THE NAME OF THE COMPANY? DO YOU INTEND TO OPEN SISTER COMPANIES WITH THE SAME OR A SIMILAR NAME?

'Yan' is taken from the Mandarin word 燕 which means Swiftlet, Yan Society hopes to spread the goodness of bird's nest to society. Society at large is moving at a frantic pace with increasing demands and expectations. Convenience is important whilst maintaining safety and quality is paramount. Currently, we have no plans for another company.

WHAT IS THE CORE PHILOSOPHY OF YOUR WORK?

Trust, reliability and quality.

My entire career has been with reputable oil and gas companies, and accounting firms where safety, integrity and quality deliverables are what the organisations are well known for. This is what I continue to practice and embed as key cornerstones of my company's philosophy.

IS THERE A QUOTE THAT INSPIRES YOU WHEN YOU'RE FRUSTRATED OR DISAPPOINTED WITH WORK?

"Positive thinking evokes more energy, more initiatives, more happiness".