

Lifestyle

@Star Biz7 October 14 - October 20, 2023

A cut above

Angeline Tan, CEO of Maria's SteakCafe, on keeping family at the heart of a thriving F&B chain.



A Sizzling success

Angeline Tan and Ai Lee Chong of Maria's SteakCafe discuss upscale expansions, carrying a family legacy, and honouring their Ipoh roots.

By **NICOLE CHEW**
nicolechew@thestar.com.my
Photos: **FAISAL HISHAN**

AT Maria's SteakCafe's newest outlet perched on the Sky level of 1 Powerhouse in Bandar Utama, premium quality steaks come with a side of panoramic views.

Floor to ceiling windows and minimalist furnishings offer a heightened dining experience as patrons tuck into an array of gastronomic classics for which the Maria's name is known. Oxtail soup, spicy mussels, New Zealand baby lamb cutlets and the wide selection of steak options are counted among long-held favourites of the restaurant's loyal customers.

The elevated outpost is the latest of the brand's five locations currently open in Malaysia. With its lofty, modern sky-dining set-up, it strikes a clear contrast to the business' rustic 20-year-old original eatery up north in Ipoh. Yet Maria's SteakCafe's CEO Angeline Tan and Business Director Ai Lee Chong affirm that despite outer appearances, each of the outlets at its core remains committed to its ethos of 'Food. Family. Legacy'.

This year, Maria's SteakCafe celebrates 24 years since the opening of the first Maria's establishment in Greentown, Ipoh. The business' story started in 1999, when Tan's parents, Philip and Maria, turned their love of cooking and hosting friends and family into a small restaurant offering up Western-style culinary comforts.

"Before that, we were a home kitchen. My mom was very good at making cakes, pies, pastries, and my dad would cook more savoury stuff such

as the oxtail soup that you can still find on our menu, and they would do deliveries and pick-up," recalls Tan. "When we opened this first outlet, we were one of the first few in Ipoh to actually specialise in Western food back then."

While most today associate the brand with steak, the restaurant, then called Maria's Café, only served one steak dish, focusing more broadly on pastries and other Western dishes. Diners flocked to the local dining spot not only for Philip and Maria's cakes, pies, and lasagnes but also for their regular caffeine fix.

"I believe we were among the first in Ipoh who brought in a coffee machine. Now they have it everywhere, but at that time you didn't really see it," she notes. "My brother was working in the café at the time, and he would tell me that he served about a hundred cappuccinos a day, because we were one of the only ones who owned a machine back then."

Steaking a claim

A fork in the road came around 2011 when Tan's sister, who had been running the family business, planned to step away from it after getting married. Tan, who was an actuarial science graduate working in Singapore at the time, offered to come back to help with the operations.

"It was a difficult decision to make.



A desire to preserve her family's legacy led Tan to take over the business.



Maria's SteakCafe CEO Angeline Tan and Business Director Ai Lee Chong. - Maria's SteakCafe

“If it’s your family, you would want to try your best within your ability to give them what they want, so this reflects in the service that we provide. As long as they’re happy and satisfied, we will go the extra mile because we appreciate them”



The flagship Maria's Signature Suria KLCC outlet opened in 2020.



Classic dishes which have been on Maria's menu since the beginning remain unchanged.

I thought about it for a while because at the time the restaurant was not that profitable,” she admits. After some consideration, the desire to preserve her family’s legacy ultimately led her to take over the business. “I knew the restaurant and I loved the food, and I thought it would be a pity if no one at least tried to keep it alive.”

Since taking the helm, Tan has been a key driving force in expanding the business’ presence and developing its offerings. Today, Maria’s SteakCafe has outlets in Bangsar, Bandar Sunway, and KLCC, in addition to the latest 1 Powerhouse location and the original restaurant in Ipoh.

Its flagship Maria’s Signature Suria KLCC outlet opened in December 2020, boasting sleek, modern interiors and water fountain-facing KLCC Park views. Together with the restaurant at 1 Powerhouse, the latest additions to the portfolio appear to signal a more upscale direction for the Maria’s brand. Tan and Chong reveal, however, that the growth of new dining venues was not particularly planned.

“It does seem like it, because we went from this very homey kind of ambience, to this (1 Powerhouse), but it was by chance that we managed to get the place,” shares Chong.

“We are always open to opportunities, so when the right opportunity comes, we expand,” Tan stresses. “I think what people expect these days has increased. The competition has increased, therefore we have to also provide better quality food, service

and ambience as well.”

This flexible approach has guided the business’ journey since Tan took over the reins. “Angeline is very adventurous and open to trying things out, seeing what works, and focusing on that,” observes Chong.

For instance, the pivot to specialising in steaks came around the time of the Bangsar branch’s opening, after noticing a significant demand at their restaurants. “Customers would come from near and far, but they always wanted to have the steaks, so that was when she realised that we should focus on steaks,” Chong adds.

Rather than rebranding as a steakhouse, the team opted for the name ‘Maria’s SteakCafe’, so as to not lose the restaurant’s original casual, family-oriented appeal. “‘Steakhouse’ felt very formal,” opined Tan. “We have customers who come in wearing T-shirts, shorts or slippers, and we didn’t want them to feel like they couldn’t step into the restaurant.”

Searing growth

This commitment to ensuring each Maria’s SteakCafe location retains an atmosphere where all are welcome also extends to the food offerings. Chong states, “If you look at our menu, it caters to everybody. We have high to mid-range options, so anybody can come to Maria’s”.

The family’s founding legacy continues to act as an anchor for the business, even as it expands in size and

scope. Chong says, “We definitely want to improve our interiors and food quality, and take trends into account, but our menu will still stay the same, especially in terms of the family recipe and taste.”

That is, however, not to say that there aren’t any new dishes launched regularly. Just recently, Maria’s introduced Japanese Kobe beef onto the menu - yet another premium meat option that Tan is especially excited about offering.

Meanwhile, at the restaurants’ bars, diners will find a dynamic series of cocktails curated by celebrated mixologist Amanda Wan. Paying homage to the restaurants’ Ipoh roots, the beverages include the Sesame Sour, a bourbon-based ode to a local peanut candy; and the Pompaloma, which highlights the region’s famed pomelo fruit.

At the same time, Tan is adamant that the menu’s staple items, which have been with Maria’s since the beginning, remain unchanged. “For example, our cakes, the oxtail soup, the spaghetti, and the way we cook our steaks,” she lists. “We only create new recipes - we don’t touch the old ones that were created by my parents.”

Family first

Another way the business strives to keep its family-founded legacy alive is by fostering meaningful relationships with its personnel and customers.

This emphasis has been especially important during the post-pandemic era, as hiring difficulties continue to plague the restaurant industry.

“The way we treat all of our staff and each other is also like family,” Chong shares. “We want them to be able to say, ‘If I get a better job offer elsewhere, will they treat me as well as Maria’s does?’”

Chong further elaborates on how each guest is cared for as one of their own when they dine at the restaurants: “If it’s your family, you would want to try your best within your ability to give them what they want, so this reflects in the service that we provide. As long as they’re happy and satisfied, we will go the extra mile because we appreciate them.”

Asked about the most fulfilling part of the journey since taking on the business, Tan shares that moments big and small, from opening an outlet at the iconic KLCC landmark, to hearing regular feedback from pleased diners, are what makes all their efforts worthwhile.

“On a daily basis, the most rewarding thing is when we receive positive comments from our customers,” she says. “Just yesterday in Bangsar a customer told us that ‘the food is great, the service is great, everything is great, and it feels like I’m dining at home’.”

For a business such as Maria’s SteakCafe that puts family at the heart of everything they do, there’s likely no higher compliment.