

# A taste for bigger things

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Mr Tan keeps a tight lid on quality control and takes customer feedback seriously.

PHOTO: JAMIE KOH

The Lerk Thai restaurant chain opens its 11th outlet in Singapore and aims to expand regionally

By FELIX CHEONG

IT MAY only be four years old, but the Lerk Thai chain of restaurants is expanding rapidly, with 11 branches in Singapore.

The latest outlet, located at the basement of Tanjong Pagar MRT Station, began serving customers on Feb 25.

Another outlet will open at Paradox Centre at the end of this month.

The other Lerk Thai restaurants are at Bugis Village, Marina Square, White Sands, Singapore Expo, Woodlands Civic Centre, NUS The Deck Cafeteria, Square 2 and Changi Airport's Terminal 3 departure and transit lounges.

Thanks to its executive chef Naisuntom Tosophol, who once helmed the kitchen for a royal Thai household, the Lerk Thai brand has become synonymous with affordable and delicious Thai cuisine.

Its executive director Jack Tan says: "Our executive chef spends a lot of time and effort to develop new dishes and

plan menu changes.

"We also manufacture our own sauces and are in the midst of attaining the Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Point certification."

He adds that Lerk Thai's menu now boasts more than 100 food items.

Lerk Thai (*lerk* means "select" in Thai, a reference to the parent company, listed Select Catering Services) is scrupulous in standardising its cooking methods and kitchen management. It hires only qualified Thai chefs.

The management, says Mr Tan, keeps a tight lid on quality control.

Mr Tan himself dines at the restaurant at least twice a week. The company takes customer feedback seriously.

Such attention to detail explains why the chain has remained a top draw since it opened its first outlet at Bugis Village in 2004.

Over the past four years, Lerk Thai has also picked up a number of awards.

Among them are the Top 100 Signature Dish in 2005 and 2007 by Eatme Signature and the Healthier Choice Award by the Health Promotion Board last year.

It also won a Singapore Prestige Brand Award, conferred by the Association of Small and Medium Enterprises, last year.

Mr Tan pays tribute to his staff for these awards.

"The quick turnover in the service industry doesn't affect us much, as we have a very good incentive system to retain our staff," he says, pointing out that Lerk Thai was one of the companies that took the Pro-Family Pledge in 2006.

The Pro-Family Pledge is an initiative by Family Matters! Singapore and the Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports to get businesses to commit to building stable families.

The results: satisfied customers, happy employees and a healthy bottom line for the company.

"Last year, our monthly turnover was in the region of \$650,000," says Mr Tan. "The branches at shopping malls tend to reap big profits because of their good location."

He says the group's target is to have 20 branches in Singapore by the end of the year. But he is not planning to stop there.

"We're opening up franchising opportunities in Kuala Lumpur and Jakarta," he adds.

"With assistance from IE Singapore, we've already spoken to a few potential franchisees in KL.

"It'll take us a few months to research and explore their background, food and beverage experience and capability before we make a decision to whom to award the franchise."

a red banner year for the group. In the pipeline are a number of promotional strategies, such as collaborations and tie-ups with banks like DBS, UOB, OCBC and Citibank; a high-tea buffet to be launched in April priced at just \$10 a person; treats for customers during their birthday month; and free gifts with every \$30 spent during the Songkran Festival in April.

Children aged below 12 will also get freebies and a drink on the house when they dine in with their parents on Sundays.

All these are some of the innovative ways which Mr Tan hopes will pull in more diners.

Besides advertising in public media like magazines and newspapers, he intends to put up point-of-sale posters and tent cards.

"We will also send out SMS and e-mail messages to patrons whenever we introduce new dishes," says Mr Tan.

"With these marketing plans and more branches opening, we expect our turnover to double this year. We're very confident and optimistic about 2008."

As part of its announcement to its new opening at Tanjong Pagar, Lerk Thai is currently running a one-week promotion till March 9 for its signature dish — the special prawn cake or *tawd man rung* — at \$1 a piece, at all its outlets for dine-in only.