

▪ Organic

Haven sent

The organic food movement is gaining momentum in Malaysia and here's a unique set-up that promotes better living by providing a variety of organic products and services under one roof.

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(Facing page) A Little Green Planet van delivers organic vegetables from their farm directly to their retail outlets; (this page from left) consumers can find a wide range of organic produce at the shop; Haven is housed in a spacious bungalow with a huge lawn

It's late morning when I stroll into The Haven in Ampang Hilir. I order a breakfast of free-range eggs, mushrooms and grilled sausages, which I wash down with slow-pressed orange juice. Tummy filled, I stroll over to Organique Therapies for its signature Oxy-Spa Facial Treatment to make my stressed skin look firmer and brighter. Then it's shopping time, first at Bodybar to stock up on Logona Naturkosmetik cleansing milk for my sensitive skin; then a bag of ladies' fingers from Little Green Planet's compact but well-stocked grocery mart; and finally, a Hevea 100% natural rubber latex pacifier from Tiny Tapir for my little niece – it's gentler for baby and environmentally friendly too. On the way out, I take away a flat white from the RAW (Real and Wholesome) Coffee kiosk. I'm officially addicted to the pitch-perfect rendition and justifiably so, as it's brewed from organic coffee beans by one of the world's best espresso machines, the Kees van der Westen 'Speedster'.

While there is no shortage of organic restaurants or retail outlets offering sustainable products in Malaysia, one-stops where eco-conscious products and services are

conveniently consolidated under one roof are still fairly rare. With time a rare commodity, Haven is, quite simply, heaven-sent for anyone who wants to embrace a healthier lifestyle.

Farm to table

The story of Haven began with organic retailer, Little Green Planet. The founding partners traded the world of IT for farming when they realised that the farm-to-table movement was gaining momentum. "We figured there was commercial potential," says Adrian Foo, one of the partners. ▶



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(Clockwise from left) Chef Bryan Tang dishing out Haven's popular fusion pesto pasta; one of several hearty salad choices; organic farms face more challenges in ensuring soil fertility; (facing page from left) RAW coffee complements Haven's all-organic menu; Little Green Planet offers a weekly subscription of an organic vegetable box, delivered to your doorstep



Sign me up, greenie!

Reduce your carbon footprint and subscribe to Little Green Planet's home delivery service, modelled loosely after the community-supported agriculture (CSA) concept. For RM160, you receive a weekly supply of fresh organic produce from Little Green Planet's farm for four weeks. The type of vegetables will depend on what is in season. Starter packs are available at RM49.90. www.littlegreenplanet.com.my

I noticed one of the farmers using fishing nets. It's far more economical and efficient – you can unroll it like a curtain rather than reassemble the raffia strings strand by strand."

In June 2011, Little Green Planet opened its first retail shop selling farm produce, personal care and baby products, gluten-free goods, grocery essentials and a cornucopia of health supplements. Its compost-grown, non-GMO, chemical and

pesticide-free greens, sold at wallet-friendly prices, were a hit. Encouraged by the reception, Adrian and his partners opened a second outlet and then another at Twelve at Ampang Hilir. Given its choice location – just

minutes away from KL's most popular retail area – the founders felt that the white-walled bungalow with a huge lawn hemmed by frangipani and coconut trees and a variety of tropical shrubs

HAVEN WAS BORN AS A COLLECTIVE OFFERING A VARIETY OF ORGANIC PRODUCTS AND SERVICES

It's one thing to jump on the bandwagon, but quite another not to fall off when the ride gets bumpy. Organic farmers face more complex record keeping processes, marketing and distribution issues, production challenges (involving weed and pest management) while ensuring soil fertility. "If I knew it would be so challenging, I might have thought twice!" Adrian laughs. "I've come to believe that in business, ignorance as an asset. Once you get your feet wet, there is nothing much you can do but to grit your teeth and bear it."

Adrian and his partners visited farms around the country and consulted seasoned organic growers before clearing a 20-acre piece of land off the Karak highway for planting. "I've learnt that the farming community is very generous when it comes to advice. However, how well you execute what you learn depends on you," he says. "We learnt a lot through trial and error. The rainy season really affected output, so we built a plastic shelter for rainfall to glide off the sides and not directly impact the leaves. For creeper-type vegetables like French beans, long beans, bittergourd and cucumber, we originally used ultraviolet-resistant raffia to form a supporting trellis. Then



could be more than a simple retail shop. Haven was born as a collective of like-minded entrepreneurs offering a variety of organic products and services under one roof.

Food for the skin and body

Organic skincare retailer Bodybar was the first to come on board, followed by organic coffee purveyor RAW Coffee and

sustainable living specialist, Tiny Tapir. Bodybar founders, husband-and-wife team Victor Lim and Michelle Chen, were already supplying their skincare products to the other two Little Green Planet outlets and decided to launch Organique Therapies at The Haven. This outlet offers natural and organic treatments to supplement their retail segment.

Their massages were gaining popularity, but when the

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previous F & B operators left at the end of June 2011, they were in a quandry. "The dining outlet is usually the crowd-puller. Although there were food and beverage operators that expressed interest, their dining concept didn't jive with our wellness focus," Victor says. In the end, he decided to take up the challenge himself despite having no prior experience in the food and beverage industry. He salvaged benches, turned old pallets into picket fences, cobbled together old sofas and even "swapped five modern chairs for a goldfish-insignia-ed chair" from his grandma! To retain the organic vibe, the colonial building was left pretty much as is. The result is a warm, homey ambience, a welcome change from the clinical sterility of some organic food stores and cafes.

Victor recruited Bryan Tang who – using his experience of working in a vegetarian restaurant and a 5-star hotel, combined with youthful enthusiasm – created a menu that reflected the playful, individualistic spirit of the place. Diners get to choose from hearty classics with a clever twist – essentially great wholesome food that won't have you hankering for a good old greasy burger!

One wouldn't think of adding French beans to spaghetti carbonara, but I discover it lends a crunchy texture to the dish. Bryan flavours his Western pasta with *yin choy* (amaranth), which goes surprisingly well with the robust flavours of sun-dried tomatoes, pine-nuts and pesto. Oh, and there is a burger on the menu – however, the patties are made from grass-fed



beef, "the way cows were naturally meant to eat, not stuck in a shade and fed by humans," is how Victor puts it.

Considering his impassioned views on green living, I'm surprised that he is a late bloomer in the whole 'green living' thing. "My wife became interested in the organic movement to alleviate her chronic eczema, so I had no choice," he jokes. Where possible, the couple incorporates fresh organic produce from Little Green Planet, delivered daily from a farm in Karak. "Our menu focuses on ingredients that are not harmful to the body. We use chemical and pesticide free ingredients, free range chicken and eggs." To fully retain nutrients, the food is prepared using healthy methods. "We use a masticating



(Facing page from top) Freshly plucked okra; Adrian, one of the co-founders, between rows of corn at the farm; (top) Haven's relaxing interiors make diners feel at ease right away; Little Green Planet's house brand noodles



juice extractor, which subjects the fruits to less heat than a centrifugal juicer, and preserves a lot more of the living enzymes and antioxidants." Victor is the perfect walking advertisement for the benefits of good eating – he says his energy levels have increased and anyone can see that his skin glows.

Showing results

Little Green Planet's efforts are certainly making an impact: At the end of 2011, it earned the highly-coveted Skim Organik Malaysia (SOM or Malaysian Organic Certification Scheme) issued by the Agriculture and Agro-based Industries Ministry. While the 20-acre farm is modest by organic farm standards, it generates enough produce for several supermarkets in the Klang Valley and a growing number of clients who subscribe to its home delivery programme. (see sidebar on previous page)

Clearly, their shrewd understanding of marketing and

business strategies – coupled with the desire to feed people well – have enabled the founders to get this far. But I suspect there's more to it than the desire to succeed. At their farm, Adrian stops his four-wheel drive at a corn patch. He alights and dives into it, and emerges with a pearly white cob. "Still young," he says apologetically. "Another three days would be better." I bite tentatively into it as I am more accustomed to having corn that has had all its goodness boiled or steamed out of it. "It's incredibly sweet," I gasp. "Of course," Adrian grins, then adds, "It's organic!"

Haven 12 Jalan Ampang Hilir, KL Opens 9.30am-9pm, Tues-Sun Tel +603 4252 3100 www.havenkl.com; **Little Green Planet** Lot 65 UG1, PUBLIKA Shopping Centre, Solaris Dutamas No 1 Jalan Dutamas 1, Desa Sri Hartamas, KL Opens 10am-10pm daily Tel +603 6211 1280 and Lot G107 & G108, Ground Floor CENTREPOINT, No 3, Lebuhraya Bandar Utama, Bandar Utama, Petaling Jaya Opens 10am-10pm daily Tel +603 7728 8288

Other organic outlets in KL

Eco-Oasis Restaurant (7 Jalan Riong off Jalan Maarof, Bangsar Tel +603 2284 2393 www.eco-oasis.com.my) The lemongrass meehoun soup, quinoa mango salad and seaweed fried rice come highly recommended. You'll find novelty items like soap nuts and 100%-plant-based natural hair dye at its organic store.

Woods Macrobiotics (www.macrobiotics-malaysia.com) Malaysia's first Macrobiotic total health and healing centre has expanded into a chain of establishments providing vegan macrobiotic organic food and health consultation. Its breads and pastries are made using the German long fermentation backferment method and crystal-charged water, said to improve digestion.

BMS Organics (www.bmsorganics.com) Founded by a family who were noticeably healthier after a six-month experiment with an organic raw food diet, this set-up retails organic vegetarian food products and runs cafes that embrace the Be Lohas (Lifestyle of Health and Sustainability) concept. Try the Five Colours High Energy Lei Cha, Soy Milk Curry Laksa and Bamboo Charcoal Burger.

E Garden Recipe (LG 55 SS2 Mall, SS2 Petaling Jaya Tel +603 7960 4353 www.gardenrecipe.com.my) It specialises in healthy dishes based on mostly vegetarian ingredients. Brown rice is used in place of the high glycaemic-index white variety, and lower-cholesterol yoghurt instead of coconut milk for the curry dishes.

Chef Lim's Kitchen (Lot 2-47, 2-48 & 2-49, The Scott Garden, 4 1/2 Miles Jalan Klang Lama Tel +603 7982 3395 www.cheflim.com.my) From everyday favourites like Cantonese style *kuay teow* (flat noodles), to special occasion treats like curry fish head (vegetarian, naturally), the palate-piquing menu is doing a slap-up job converting city folk into greenies.