

**Personality**

Its satisfied clientele includes multinational corporations, diplomats and royalty, so catering specialist Chef On Wheels Catering ([www.chefonwheels.com.my](http://www.chefonwheels.com.my)) has definitely been serving up dining experiences that tantalise the senses. We speak to **Seet Wai Song**, who co-founded the company with his wife, Christine.

**You were a tailor before becoming a Swiss-trained chef. How did you end up in the catering business?**

After years as a tailor, I wanted a change of scene, so using my savings, I went backpacking. My travels led me to Switzerland, where my cousin was studying in a hotel management school. When my money started to run out, he suggested that I enroll in his school. After six months of theory classes, you get to be an intern for six months. That's how I ended up in Les Roches (one of the world's top three hospitality management schools) where I met my wife and future business partner, Christine. After returning to Malaysia, I worked in a 5-star hotel before venturing out on my own.

When we started our catering business, we had little more than a small kitchen stove. For our first catering gig, we went round like headless chickens borrowing cutlery from friends ...our glasses came from coffeshops! We made countless trips ferrying supplies in our Nissan car. Happily, the client was satisfied and the business grew through word of mouth. When we acquired production houses as clients, we had to travel to locations that were hours away. I bought a lorry and had basic kitchen equipment fitted in, to allow cooking even at remote locations. Our company name tells part of our story.

**How do you ensure your food appeals to the senses?**

Catering is not just about serving good food. The overall presentation is important. If there is space, we set up stations instead of a one-line buffet. Hygiene, décor, even a clean tablecloth contributes to a pleasant dining experience. When guests arrive, they see the canopy. The first thing they touch is the tablecloth.

You eat with the eyes first, then comes smell, and only then taste. We go for premium ingredients from suppliers who are also on the vendor list of five-star hotels to ensure high quality.

**You have catered for weddings and open houses, and for production sets that have starred Hollywood celebrities like Catherine Zeta-Jones and Naomi Watts. What have been some of the most challenging requests in your 15 years in the business?**

Many things go into making a dining event happen. Recently, a client asked us to source for bagpipes. Another time, we did an event for a company which reared goats and wanted dishes to feature that.

Working for a production house is probably the most stressful because you're expected to do things on the spot. They'll tell you, "I have this Italian producer coming...can we have an espresso coffee machine on site?" They're not going to pay for it and I certainly am not going to buy a RM7,000 machine for a one-off request! So I have to borrow one. This is where contacts are invaluable.

Through the years, we've learnt that being a caterer involves more than just cooking and serving. To stand out, you need to be versatile, innovative and have the network to provide end-to-end service.

**What are your golden rules for minimising costly and embarrassing faux pas? Be earlier than on time**

If the function is supposed to begin at 1pm, have everything ready by, say, noon. Make sure you have enough time to accommodate last-minute nitty-gritties. If you forget something, you can run back and get it.

**Make sure there is enough food** There is nothing worse than running out of food, especially at a wedding. How does this happen? It could be that your client ordered for 100 but invited 200 guests, or the caterer simply did not prepare enough food. Whichever the case, guests will

always think it is the latter! I always make slightly more as backup.

When the order is for 100, you cannot cook exactly for that many people. Our principle is to be safe.

**Delve into details** We don't believe in whipping out a fixed menu and asking clients to pick Set

A or B. Even for a seemingly straightforward request like a Western sit-down dinner, we make it a point to find out whether there are vegetarians, how many courses they want, and if any of their guests have food allergies. For corporate functions, we want to know if the venue is carpeted – we'll then recommend food with minimal gravy to minimise spillage. We believe the devil is in the details – this is what sets us apart.



**Lexicon**

We've all done it, some of us more regularly than others – eat at our office desk, that is. According to the Urban Dictionary, this is called having an Al Desco meal, as in "I'm lunching Al Desco so I have more time to work on this report".