



From left, Mr Kwek Theng Swee, Dr Mark Xu and Dr Fu Siaw Liung with the Sakura Chicken, Cordyceps chicken and normal broiler produced by Meng Kee Poultry.

Meng Kee creates an edge with value-added broiler



An attempt to set itself apart from other broiler producers and to address price competition has led Meng Kee Poultry to turn to raising value added broilers, whose meat offers health and taste benefits. CONNY PEREIRA writes that the company is onto its second product that has already been introduced in Singapore.

Meng Kee Poultry, based in Malaysia's southern state of Johor, recently won the Merit in Innovation Award from the Food Product Award 2009-2011 held by Singapore Institute of Food Science and Technology for its anchor product, Sakura Chicken.

The company is the farming arm of Singapore based Kee Song Poultry, one of the first modern and vibrant broiler processing operations in the Republic.

While it was initially focused on broiler processing and retailing, in the mid 1990's when demand for processed chicken began to grow and at the same time Kee Song wanted to fulfil the excess capacity at its plant, they decided to invest in broiler operations across the causeway.

Ten years after the company established Meng Kee Poultry in Yong Peng, Johor, they began to upgrade and extend their farming

operations and they now operate 15 farms.

The company's growth plans are continuing with new initiatives to establish two farms to accommodate about 5.4 million birds.

"Once this is in place, we'll reach production of 1.2-1.5 million/month," revealed CEO Kwek Theng Swee.

Developing an edge

"Singapore's daily broiler consumption is 150,000 birds, but business for the local trade has dropped by about 20% to 120,000 birds/day although the population has grown from 3.5 million to 4.5 million people in the last 10 years," explained Mr Kewk.

"Frozen chicken imports from Brazil and China have contributed significantly to this decline," he added.

"These products are subsidized

Winning formula

Kee Song Brothers Poultry focused on the quality of meat. The fat content of Cordyceps chicken meat is said to be 50% lower than normal chicken, and is labelled as lower fat or a healthier choice in Singapore.

Marketed through NTUC FairPrice supermarkets, it is also available at leading hotels and restaurants, poultry stores and butcher shops.

According to Mark Xu, CEO of AP Nutripharm who is also a scientist, Cordyceps sinensis is one of the most valued Chinese herbs.

“Research suggests that there are six classes of main active compounds in Cordyceps sinensis, among which Cordycepin is the most important one, and is also a fingerprinting compound for Cordyceps sinensis.

The product is said to contain a high amount of Inosine monophosphate (IMP) a flavour enhancing compound in chicken meat - 50% more IMP than any type of chicken. Apart from the flavour edge, IMP is also said to contribute to higher energy levels, and improved liver and heart function.

Dr Xu said the birds are raised by adding APN Cordyceps sinensis into the chicken feed. Incorporated with advanced Japanese farming technology, the chickens are reared in a closed and controlled environment using the cordyceps sinensis to replace antibiotics or growth promoters.

by their governments and so they are competitive in pricing. This has impacted on demand for fresh chicken in Singapore.”

This pressure led Kee Song and Meng Kee to look for ways to create an edge for their products. They discovered that in Singapore consumers could identify premium beef and pork but not premium chicken.

The closest there was to premium chicken was organic chicken



Strict biosecurity protocols are in place on Meng Kee's farms.

imported from Australia that retailed at SGD 30-40 each (USD 21.5 – 28.7).

“Our search led us to Sakura chicken that adopted advanced Japanese lactobacillus farming technology minus the use of antibiotics or synthetic growth promoters. The lactobacillus was developed by a Japanese professor. We decided to target the premium meat market with this product and began our own trials by removing all antibiotics and AGP's and including the lactobacillus into the drinking water and feed of the birds.

“Initially, we even sprayed the birds a few times a day with this lactobacillus enriched water but stopped soon after when we found it did not have much impact. This was three years ago.”

Marketing Sakura chicken

After a few batches, Meng Kee had perfected their growing technique for Sakura chicken and began setting them apart from normal broilers with a pink ring on their legs.

Generally three sizes of chicken are seen in a batch – the small is marketed as Sakura Junior, medium is Sakura chicken and the large is channelled to retailers who run specialized Sakura Chicken Rice stalls.

“We also do portion cuts and utilize all portions and sizes of Sakura chicken. It took us three

years to establish real profitability,” revealed Mr Kwek.

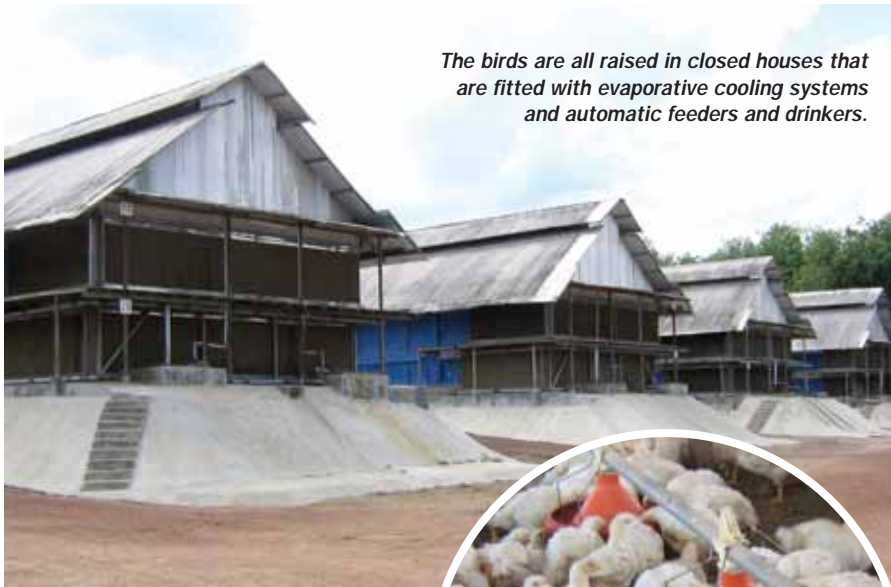
“When promoting it we linked it to yoghurt, a drink people are familiar with because of the lactobacillus in it. It was easier for consumers to accept it.

“We also played on the Japanese reputation for good standards and quality and used the Sakura flower and a softer colour. We spent about SGD 500,000 (USD 359,000) to educate and win the trust of consumers. We did floor promotions, came out with a recipe book and premium gifts.

“What we have now is the third generation of the Sakura chicken and hope to reach a fourth and even more stable generation. We use the Cobb strain for the



The Cobb strain is used for the Sakura chicken and emphasis is on the quality of meat.



The birds are all raised in closed houses that are fitted with evaporative cooling systems and automatic feeders and drinkers.

Sakura chicken and emphasize on the quality of meat.”

Imperial Cordyceps chicken

Just as the company had reached stable production of Sakura chicken, Dr Mark Xu, Managing Director of Singapore based AP Nutripharm approached the company with the idea of Cordyceps chicken. Dr Xu had achieved great results with the introduction of Cordyceps eggs produced in conjunction with Chew’s Agriculture in Singapore.

“We thought it was a good idea because among Asians, and Chinese in particular, Cordyceps is viewed as a herb that people generally consume for health reasons. It is known to contain bioactive compounds that support healthy lung and kidney functions. We thought it would be good for chickens used for soup,” said Mr Kwek.

“We felt we could offer an alternative that was not only



comparably priced but also raised in a hygienic and safe manner. We went through many trials with this too and consulted with Chinese physicians who recommended the herbs to be used for eight different varieties of soup.”

The growth rate is good and the birds are harvested at 28-32 days since small to medium sized birds are sufficient for soup and the bird has to grow slowly. Each day, the company offers 500-800 birds to the market.

“Cordyceps chicken would be a good alternative to black chicken and native chicken that’s usually used for soup,” added Fu Siaw Liung, Production and Technical Manager of Meng Kee.

“Currently consumers use black chicken and native chicken for soup and these are not of a standard weight range, yet consumers have to pay a per bird price regardless of weight.”

Dr Fu added that managing the farm and houses is very important to be able to achieve these small numbers and sufficient batches.

“It is a lot of work but then we are

Cordyceps sinensis

Cordyceps sinensis belongs to a family of parasitic fungus which attacks a species of caterpillar in winter. The fungus eats away at the caterpillar as it hibernates and when the process is complete, the caterpillar looks like a plant.

Its name in Chinese ‘dong chong xia cao’ (冬虫夏草) literally means “winter worm, summer grass”.

Dr Xu claims there is no difference between the cultured and natural cordyceps.

“We can confirm that majority of the compounds are present at similar or even higher levels. We have many reports to substantiate and prove this and an independent research organization will soon reveal its finding on our product,” he said.

“The species that we culture is said to be worth about USD 30,000/kg. We have created a cultivation condition that matches the natural environment and this offers consistent quality,” he added.

working towards a premium brand,” he said.

Meng Kee is the only farm in the world to produce Cordyceps chicken, commented Dr Xu. In the west, Cordyceps is being tested in feed but basically to replace AGP’s and to improve the livability of the birds, he added.

In August this year, it was introduced to the Singapore market and branded as Imperial Cordyceps Chicken. For the first month, to entice customers to try the product, the company added a free pack of herbs for the soup.

Each dressed whole bird with head and legs, is tray packed and weighs about 1 kg. It currently retails at SGD 16.80 per bird (USD 12.05) and is targeted mainly at medium and upper class consumers who are health conscious and aware of the advantages of Chinese herbs. ■



The Imperial Cordyceps Chicken is seen as a good alternative to black chicken and native chicken that’s usually used for soup.