

Kee Song Brothers Poultry embarks on a road less travelled

In its commitment to protect consumers' health, a Singapore broiler producer stands out from the competition in an innovative approach by feeding its birds with an expensive Chinese herb and lactobacillus.

by Chris TEO



Kwek Theng Swee, chief executive of Kee Song Brothers Poultry Industries.

Poultry production is characterised by high turnover, driving livestock producers around the world to find innovative solutions to boost broilers' growth as shortening the rearing cycle raises productivity, and ultimately higher profits. The common approach of the past in feeding antibiotics and growth promoters to the birds has since been banned in several countries.

Kee Song Brothers, a home-grown poultry production and processing company in Singapore, has chosen a road less travelled, as its decision to gradually phase out the use of these chemicals was reached years before its peers followed suit, as well as applying innovation in raising poultry.

"In view of the serious implications on human health, we feel it is necessary to progressively phase out the feeding of antibiotics and growth promoters to our poultries," said Kwek Theng Swee, chief executive of the group.

Kwek explained that the escalating usage of non-therapeutic antibiotics as a type of growth promoter defeats the original purpose of the drug which is to kill bacteria. Studies have linked antibiotics use in animal production to the emergence of antibiotic-resistant strains of bacteria in meat. Overuse of antibiotics in this manner

could increase the risk of antibiotics resistance in humans, resulting in treatment failures of illnesses caused by these bacteria.

From its humble beginning as a family business that deals with poultry wholesaling in the 1950s, Ong Kee Song, the eldest son of the family, later took charge and established Kee Song Brothers Poultry Industries Pte Ltd in 1975.

Since then, it has evolved into a group enterprise with two companies in Singapore and six in neighbouring Malaysia, employing about 300 workers in total.

Kee Song Brothers set up their own poultry farm in Johor with the aim to produce products that suit the consumers' needs and to eliminate the risk of procuring from unreliable poultry sources, which essentially increases the company's efficiency and productivity.

"We always secure and consolidate our market demand first before engaging in rearing activities. That was the reason that prompted us to move north 15 years ago."

Kwek explained that the philosophy of the company is first to listen and understand the demand and requirement of its clients, bridging the relationship between the company and consumers closer.

Currently, Kee Song Brothers is one of the major suppliers of poultry products in Singapore with its customer base including hotels, restaurants, supermarkets and caterers. However, it is a long, sometimes turbulent process before it achieves its current status.

Going against the tide

According to Kwek, the demand for poultry meat in Singapore has fallen from a peak of 150,000 birds to 120,000 birds per day over the past few years. One main contributing factor is the increased imports of frozen poultry meat from other countries and regions such as Brazil, US and Europe.

In order to protect and support their labour-intensive agriculture industries, the foreign governments offer subsidies to their farmers to aid them to export their farm produces. As Singapore is fundamentally a consumer market, it benefits greatly as in this case, the cost of importing poultry meat falls and consumers have found themselves a cheaper food source.

Kwek pointed out a vital issue on the safety of the imported poultry meat and the health standards set by the health authorities of the exporting countries. As slaughterhouses procure their broilers from an assortment >>

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of different farms, they are unable to control the quality of the chickens or the way the broilers are being reared.

He emphasised the importance of a food producer's social responsibility towards its customers and the society on the whole.

Lactobacillus? Cordycepin?

Just as the company was looking for the appropriate substitutions for antibiotics and growth promoters, a chance meeting with a retired Japanese professor, allowed Kee Song Brothers to develop one of its current premium products, Sakura Chicken.

The professor, with his years of research experience in the field of lactobacillus, had proposed to add the powder-based bacteria into broiler feed.

Kwek said lactobacillus is deemed a beneficial bacterium as it inhibits the growth of other harmful bacteria. Thus, the chickens do not have to be fed with antibiotics if they are being kept healthy in the first place. In addition, lactobacillus helps to enhance the digestion process as it contains an enzyme that breaks down large food particles into finer ones, making it easier for the digestive system to absorb the minerals and nutrients.

Thirdly, Kwek claimed that lactobacillus aids the disintegration of the fat cell formation in the Sakura chickens. As the current



trend is to hasten the growing period, fats accumulation in chickens are relatively prevalent as they are fed with feed containing high energy and protein components to boost their growth. Furthermore, the modern closed-style farms limit the chickens' movement, thereby pushing up their fats content.

After two years of intensive research and coupled with a few hiccups along the way, including a serious flood in its Malaysian farms culminating in losses of about S\$1 million, Sakura chickens were finally launched in Singapore's market in 2006. Currently, the demand for Sakura chickens is around 3,000 to 4,000 birds per day, accounting for about 20 percent of the company's daily sales.

Meanwhile, the latest premium product from Kee Song Brothers, Cordyceps Chicken, was also delivered not without a round of hard labour. With its idea of producing a chicken that consumers can easily brew tonic soups with, the company fed their roosters with a specially concocted feed that was mixed with cordyceps sinensis, an expensive Chinese herb believed to strengthen immunity.

In order to determine whether the chickens retain the herb essences, Kee Song Brothers sent some samples to an external laboratory for an analysis. Kwek said it was then found that a Cordyceps Chicken contains high levels of cordycepin, an extract of the herb, making it a big selling point whereby consumers can save time in their cooking process. However, large amounts of cordycepins were de-

tected in the wings and legs of the chickens, causing visible black spots, as blood circulation was higher in the more active body parts. Worried that consumers might mistake them as bruises, the company decided to add lactobacillus into the cordyceps-laden feed. Fortunately, the black marks disappeared but the nutritional benefits of cordyceps remained intact. Finished dealing with one setback, Kee Song Brothers soon faced another bombshell as the older folks had this belief, although not scientifically-proven, that roosters are full of “toxic”. The company then made the tough decision of replacing its entire batch of cordycepin-fed roosters with broiler hens and start anew.



Looking ahead

Reflecting on the major changes from a small wholesaler to being involved in poultry production, Kwek pointed out that the transition has enabled Kee Song Brothers to place much emphasis on animal welfare as the company feels that chickens living under a relaxed environment will have lower stress levels.

“If they are not tensed up, their meat will also taste better.”

That explains why the Sakura Chicken listens to Mozart’s music daily, a method that is believed to contribute to the quality of the highly-priced Kobe beef.

Secondly, the transition into a livestock producer has notched up the company’s competitiveness and standards and it aims to be a top leader in the poultry industry in producing quality products such as the Sakura and Cordyceps Chickens.

Thirdly, Kee Song Brothers strives to be different from its competitors. Therefore, the company hopes its specially created premium products will help to differentiate itself from others and raise the profile of its other products.

Currently, Kee Song Brothers is still concentrating on marketing its premium products in Singapore due to the high chicken consumption level in the country.

“There are many opportunities for the company to ex-

plore with the two Integrated Resorts slated for opening soon while several major events will be held in Singapore in the near future,” Kwek pointed out.

With the likely arrival of many high-end tourists, Kee Song Brothers hopes to entice their taste buds with its premium products, similar to Japan’s Kobe beef which commands such high demand.

As for future plans, Kee Song Brothers is preparing to launch Sakura and Cordyceps Chickens, exclusively sold in Singapore at the moment, in Malaysia which is a huge potential market. In the near term, the company will also be setting up a feedmill so as to assume full control over its feed productions. Currently, it purchases the feed from other manufacturers, thus the end-products might not always be up to their requirements.

Furthermore, Kwek shared that Kee Song Brothers is planning to invest MYR16 million to MYR20 million to build three modernised closed-style farms in Malaysia by the end of 2010. With the addition of these farms, the company aims to double its production capacity from the current 600,000 birds to 1.2 million to 1.3 million birds per month. In order to enhance its operations in Singapore, the company will also pump in SG\$10 million over the next three to five years to establish a modernised meat processing plant in the country.

Another important element of the company’s future development is to package its entire production process starting from rearing technology to the usage of lactobacillus and cordyceps in feed to its marketing strategies as a franchise and promote it to the rest of the world.

Kwek admitted that their efforts had sometimes been ridiculed by fellow competitors as being different but Kee Song Brothers adheres to its core principles and priorities amid the transforming poultry industry and ever-changing consumers’ needs.

“With our commitment to fulfill corporate social responsibility, we hope to provide consumers with premium products and yet taking care of their health.” 🌱

