

Moving out to move forward

Picotin gives up long-time base in Bukit Timah to strike out in East Coast and Sentosa Cove, reports **JASLENE PANG**

MOVING a business out of its stronghold may seem a surprising decision but for Steve Kaye, it was a rational one that will allow Picotin Express to refocus on its growth strategies.

Picotin is a cosy bistro, bar cum pizzeria that serves European food and offers takeaways and catering for social and corporate events. A concept from the Emmanuel Stroobant Group, the eatery is run by Mr Kaye and Jacky Stevens.

Picotin had been "flourishing as a great place to eat and bond with family" in Bukit Timah since 2007, and was closed earlier this year. But in hindsight, it was a good decision, says Mr Kaye.

"The size of our former Bukit Timah branch was really too big, to the extent that it became uncontrollable. For example, due to a previously signed contract, we had to provide breakfast, lunch and dinner for seven days... We even had to hire a gardener and the amount of electricity used there was really a lot," Mr Kaye says.

Finally, he closed the outlet, and opened two smaller branches - at East Coast and Sentosa Cove.

"It was a decision that I thought hard about, but eventually I saw that it was a necessary decision. Because of the change, we can hire fewer staff and do not need to be open for the whole day... Our cost has decreased about 25 per cent due to the change," says Mr Kaye, who was promoted to be a shareholder of the Picotin group in early 2011.

Before that, Mr Kaye worked with the Terence Conran Group of restau-



rants in London. He took up the position of chef de cuisine at the former Picotin branch in Bukit Timah more than six years ago.

More importantly, the change has given him more time to reflect and re-invest in different neighbourhoods that have a "good mix of people", so that the two outlets - each with a seating capacity of about a hundred - can attract customers from all walks of life.

"From the start, Picotin is about homey and comfort food that would be available at any time. More importantly, we wanted Picotin to be a place that services a community, a place where neighbours can pop in

for an afternoon coffee, a glass of wine after work, a romantic meal for two, a Sunday lunch with the family or a late-night takeaway pizza.

"And I think we have been rather successful at creating this ambience. Each outlet has its own unique neighbourhood character, yet both outlets have a relaxed environment that encourages everyone to be themselves.

"It is amazing how Picotin has this loyal nucleus of followers who all get to know each other and somehow make friends over a meal."

Mr Kaye occasionally approaches his customers for a chat or some feedback. "Getting criticism is actually great because it shows that the cus-



Consistent: The outlets at East Coast and Sentosa Cove (above), each with a seating capacity of about 100, have a relaxed ambience that encourages people to be themselves, says Mr Kaye. PHOTO: EMMANUEL STROOBANT GROUP, PICOTIN

tomers care enough about your brand that they want you to know what works and what doesn't work. And they care because they would like to come back... Of course, it is also great when we get customers telling us what is awesome."

Picotin also organises events occasionally to create a sense of community among its frequent customers. Recently, it started the occasional Wednesday quiz night.

Despite Picotin's popularity, Mr Kaye says that the plan is to take it slow when it comes to setting up new outlets or expanding overseas.

"Whether it is opening up new outlets or establishing franchises overseas, we are taking baby, preliminary steps. We are not in a rush to open as many outlets as we can because we recognise the need for consistency throughout."

He cites the two branches as an example: "Each outlet has its own neighbourhood character, yet we have also managed to ensure consistency in good ambience and food quality in both branches."

He plans to spend the next two years analysing South-east Asia to see if the market is ready for Picotin. Also in the pipeline are stalls to deal specially with takeaways.

"Takeaways are a substantial part of our business," says Mr Kaye, who reveals that takeaways generally account for about 10 per cent of his business.

"This is really very popular... some customers may want to watch football and hence look for delicious takeaways. And usually, we try our best to time our preparation of the food so well that it is ready at the latest possible minute so our customers can get their food still hot and delicious - so perhaps a stall dedicated to takeaways would be good."

"Picotin is part of the group that brought me to Singapore seven years ago... Personally, it is a business that has allowed me to grow and expand my career from the kitchen to all aspects of running an F&B business. It has given me the opportunity

to map out my vision for the business and work towards an even better product offering and company. I have been empowered to implement a growth plan for the future of Picotin. Ultimately, I will be accountable for our vision going forward."

Like most companies in the food and beverage industry, Picotin faces manpower challenges. But for Mr Kaye, winning his customers' hearts is what matters.

"I think what is most important is the loyalty of my customers. There is a saying that goes something like, 80 per cent of your revenue comes from 20 per cent of the customers... And with so many new and different restaurants coming up, loyalty has become all the more important... so as we move forward, we would try to maintain this homeliness and quality food that our customers love."

HAVE an interesting story on a small or medium-sized enterprise (SME) to share? Drop us a note on why you think the company should be featured in our weekly SME Inc pages, with details such as how the company has grown and its expansion plans. Send your e-mail to Felda Chay at feldac@sph.com.sg with the subject head: "Feature this SME", and you might read about the company in BT.