

BEYOND FOOD

Serving Up Change

We Singaporeans are known to seek out good food, especially Instagram-worthy plates, at times willing to travel great distances to locate mouth-watering dishes we have heard or read about. Uncle Kiisu is a casual fusion food joint that does not just create Instagram-worthy and delicious mod-Sin dishes; they do so with the desire to inspire change in the community. The restaurant's mentorship programme, affectionately called the "Anak Program", hires individuals from different backgrounds, including the intellectually disabled, and equips them with culinary and service skills. Read on to find out the journey of change the team behind Uncle Kiisu has embarked on, as shared by its director, Christopher Tan.

Legend

1. Christopher (centre, front) with the team on opening day
2. #CrabOnTheRedHill
3. #MentaikoCheeseBruschetta

Introduction

Tell us more about what motivated you to set up Uncle Kiisu.

I've always had this dream to build sustainable (in every sense of the word) tourism ecosystems around the region that positively impact communities in the long term. Unfortunately, like most, I did not get down to actually doing something about it till Uncle Kiisu, which I see as the launch pad to the aforementioned.

I would say that Uncle Kiisu was a combination of factors that helped form the perfect rainbow. Although we're still far away from having our "pot of gold", the little wins we have had since our opening in July this year makes this journey worthwhile.

In our story, the "pot of gold" refers to the ability to be a self-sustaining

business that impacts local and regional communities through vertical and horizontal integrations across the different channels that make up a business and restaurant. Some examples include the aprons we use, which are designed and made by disadvantaged women out of Malaysia, and our pay-it-forward tissue packets produced by a local social enterprise.

What kind of cuisine does Uncle Kiisu serve up?

We serve mod-Sin or modern Asian cuisine, concentrating on Japanese-Peranakan interpretations of food, but like we always say, we are more than just food. We are an experience; a story that we want people to be a part of.

Have you worked with persons with special needs prior to starting Uncle Kiisu?

I've never had, or more appropriately never sought, the opportunity to actively work with persons with special needs. However, I was exposed to many corporate social responsibility efforts while working at Banyan Tree Hotels & Resorts, and appreciated all that they did for the different communities where they had a presence.

The work involved

What does the training provided for your staff encompass and what are some areas in which you pay more attention to?

Honestly, we don't think that our training is any different from that of any other restaurants. We treat every team member as an equal who is capable of creating magical moments for our guests.

Apart from the basics, we try to inculcate behavioural changes and enhance each member's soft skills through storytelling, sharing of experiences and simply allowing them to be themselves. The most important thing is for our team members to be themselves, and the only big rule we have is to always be playfully respectful.

Another concept that is often missed out in many organisations is the importance of explaining "why". We make it a point to explain to each person why things are done the way they are, or why there is a need for certain standards.

Lastly, apart from periodic group training, we customise training based on each individual's needs. More importantly, we take the time to understand what interests each



individual, and where they see themselves in the future – both professionally and personally. We want to be part of their growth story and to make an impact in their lives.

Do you think that society's perception of persons with special needs has changed? What more can be done?

Honestly, I feel that not much has changed – society still remains less demanding or has lower expectations of persons with special needs. I personally feel that the best thing that can be done for these individuals is to treat them like you would anyone else and remove the stigma that they are "second-class" persons. Instead, give them the proper guidance, mentorship and recognition like you would with any staff.

Encouraging moments

How have patrons responded thus far? Are there any exceptionally encouraging incidents?

Apart from the majority of patrons loving our food and the dining experience, the most encouraging thing for us so far is seeing the way our team has grown as a collective unit, as well as individually, over the past few months. Many of our staff members have grown from being afraid to engage with customers to being able to take food orders, or even becoming confident enough to man a cooking station without abandoning it under stress.

SMA News would like to thank Christopher for sharing with us about Uncle Kiisu's operations and endeavours, and we hope that more will be done to better integrate persons with special needs into the society. ♦



Christopher has worked in the hotel industry since 2010, with his latest being at Banyan Tree Hotels & Resorts, as head of experience development. He seized the opportunity to realise his dream to play a part in developing communities and currently looks after the concept, operations, outreach and future expansion efforts of Uncle Kiisu.