

Stories by JADE CHAN
jade@thestar.com.my

Sharing its sauce with the world

Japanese soy sauce factory on Kyushu island marks 200th anniversary with refurbished factory after 2016 earthquake

SOY sauce ice cream, yuzu dressing, ponzu sauce and premium XO sauce — these are just some of the unique creations made by soy sauce brew master Hironari Hamada of Hamada Shoyu Co. Ltd.

Together with his brother and the company's honorary chairman Yasunari, 55, the siblings form the seventh generation of a 200-year-old Japanese soy sauce manufacturer based in Kumamoto city in Kyushu, Japan.

The creamy and mildly salty soy sauce ice cream available only at Hamada factory's in-house Usagi Cafe, along with a range of new condiments sold at selected supermarkets in Japan, are part of Hironari's modernisation efforts to bring the company into the 21st century.

"The dessert was inspired by a dish my late father used to enjoy, featuring milk mixed with soy sauce poured over rice.

"The ice cream is my way of making something savoury into something unique and tasty," said the production, research and development and quality assurance manager.

Hironari, 49, studied biotechnology at Tokyo University of Agriculture before joining the family business.

"While Hamada continues to manufacture its signature products — the soy sauce with 180 days and 540 days fermentation — I also try to incorporate the basics of soy sauce production or modern food technologies to create new products to diversify Hamada's portfolio."

Hironari said the company started off with the name "Hamadaya" when it was first established in 1818 and focused on wheat as its commodity.

The name was changed to "Hamada" about three decades later when it ventured into soy sauce production.

Hironari shared some insight into his family's long heritage during a double celebration to mark Hamada's 200th anniversary and the inauguration of its newly renovated factory, which had been damaged in a 2016 earthquake.

The event kicked off with a traditional Shinto blessing ceremony, followed by a tour of the refurbished factory and cooking session by several famous chefs from South-East Asia using Hamada products.

Among those present were the Hamada family, renowned architect Kengo Kuma, who oversaw the factory's redesign and renovations, as well as key executives from Hong Kong-based Fung Group and Heritage Foods Group.

Fung Group is the owner of Heritage Foods, which invests in food businesses in the fast-moving consumer goods market by acquiring and reorganising domestic food brands.

Heritage Foods' focus is on the acquisition of food brands with strong heritage, and has thus far invested in three Asian sauce and condiments brands — Hamada Shoyu of Japan, Woh



Yasunari (left), Kuma (fourth from left), Dr Fung (fifth from left), Saw (third from right) along with Kumamoto government officials and key executives from Fung Group and Heritage Foods Group during the ribbon-cutting ceremony to mark Hamada's 200th anniversary and the inauguration of its newly renovated factory.

Hup Food of Singapore and Angel Brand of Malaysia (manufactured by Bidor Kwong Heng) in Malaysia.

New venture for established group

"We think the time is right to assemble a company offering a variety of sauces and condiments, to bring out the different flavours of the Asian region," said Fung Group chairman Dr Victor K. Fung. "Our group has been in the consumer goods supply chain business for over 110 years, but focusing on non-food categories.

"Due in part to customer request to help them source for food products, we began looking into the food business in recent years. Our management felt a good place to enter the market would be in Asian sauces, which we want to bring to all over Asia and the world."

Fung said the timing was right as Heritage Foods felt people's tastes worldwide have become more diversified and they are willing to try new things.

"Diversity in food taste is a very important point, especially among the young consumers we want to appeal to," he said.

"In terms of global sauce sales and distribution, Asia accounts for half the world market. The sector is growing at about 4% globally with China growing at double digits."

Fung said Heritage Foods is building its food portfolio through selective acquisitions, focusing on companies with tradition and heritage.

"The companies we acquire offer something different that can be brought to the rest of the world. True heritage and uniqueness is important in today's world," he said.

"Everybody can claim they offer something different, but when you have history and heritage, nobody can duplicate that."

Fung said Heritage Foods was proud of its association with Hamada, a brand with a 200-year history and strong Japanese origins.

"We acquired Hamada just before the 2016 earthquake. Unfortunately, we had to invest a significant amount in its restoration, but it was something

we were happy to do," he said. "The Kumamoto government feels this is an important contribution to help symbolise the city's recovery. The Hamada building is important to the region.

"But we also took the opportunity to redo the building such that it would allow consumers to be able to feel and experience Hamada's heritage," said Fung of the cafe and retail space that would be open to the public.

He added that Heritage Foods hopes to grow its sauce business into a venture worth between USD\$500mil and USD\$1bil over the next few years.

Plans for halal market

"Over the last three years, we acquired three companies — Hamada, Woh Hup (82 years old) and Bidor Kwong Heng (74 years old)," revealed Heritage Foods (Hong Kong) Limited managing director Daniel Saw.

"Each brand has its unique products, some of which are distributed to more than 35 countries.

"We plan to bring all our heritage food products to the global market via

Heritage Foods' global distribution network and the network of Asian chefs and masterchefs whom we have strong relationships with," he said.

He said one of the conditions for Heritage Foods' acquisitions is that the families that started the companies must remain, even if on a consultancy basis.

"They assist us with the research and development and to evolve the products," said Saw.

"It is all about what is in the brains when it comes to making sauces. Plus, it sets a good example to others — that we are willing to work with the families to continue their business."

Saw said there are two research centres at Heritage Foods — Hamada (Japan) for soy sauce, and Bidor Kwong Heng (Malaysia) for chilli and spices.

Heritage Foods will soon introduce the flavours of Hamada soy sauce to the world via a technology transfer to Bidor Kwong Heng.

Bidor Kwong Heng will have the official licence to produce premium halal Hamada soy sauce, which Saw said is suitable for the South-East Asian and Middle East markets.



The celebration kicked off with a traditional Shinto blessing ceremony, witnessed by the Hamada family, key executives from Fung Group and Heritage Foods Group, Kumamoto government officials and media from around the Asian region.



(From left) Chefs Frankie Chong, Pung Lu Tin and Chong Wui Choong of Singapore, as well as Hong Kong chef Albert Au Kwok Keung preparing their respective dishes using Hamada Shoyu products for guests to try.



The newly repaired and renovated Hamada Shoyu factory recently unveiled its new look at its 200th anniversary celebration. Japanese architect Kengo Kuma undertook the task of overseeing its restoration while modernising it for today's manufacturing standards.



A cafe was added in line with efforts to modernise the Hamada factory and open parts of it to visitors. Usagi Cafe's menu offers a selection of light bites made using Hamada Shoyu products.

When modernity reinforces heritage

RESTORING and redesigning a 200-year-old structure that was damaged in an earthquake is no mean feat, let alone one that was deemed a heritage building by the government.

As the Hamada Shoyu building was registered as Tangible Cultural Property by the Japanese government in 2007, extra care had to be taken to ensure its original designs and structure of its warehouses and brickwork-supported boilers were retained.

"It was not an easy job but I enjoyed the challenge," said Kengo Kuma, the architect tasked with overseeing the factory's redesign and renovations.

Some of the Yokohama native's renowned projects include the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Stadium, Suntory Museum of Art and Asakusa Culture Tourism Centre in Tokyo, Japan, Great Bamboo Wall House in Beijing, China, and V&A Dundee Museum in Scotland.

"Hamada has a long-established history in Kumamoto, so it was necessary to

retain the original infrastructure while modernising it for today's manufacturing standards," said Kuma.

The Kengo Kuma & Associates founder said he visited the 2,400sq m factory about 15 years ago, and was impressed with how well-preserved the structure was and that it was still used to produce soy sauce.

"The building itself is very unusual — natural trunks were used as its structural system support," said Kuma.

Its design came from Japan's Edo period and was typical of those used for factories or warehouses.

"Although it sustained some cracks in the 2016 earthquake, the basic structures remained intact.

"I tried to preserve the original parts as much as possible to retain the structure's original charm and allow visitors to see the beauty of authentic Japanese-style buildings." The factory's wooden structures were built from cedar and pine, which help keep it cool even dur-

ing summer and control the building's humidity — an important factor in soy sauce production. Meanwhile, the water and electric facilities had to be completely renovated to meet modern food safety production requirements.

A reception lounge, cafe and retail space were added in line with efforts to modernise the Hamada factory and open parts of it to visitors.

"A carbon-fibre stability structure system was installed in some parts of the building for structure reinforcement and seismic resistance," said Kuma.

"It is a very new technology and is often used to strengthen wooden structures of national treasures and important cultural heritage in Japan."

In line with the building's "traditional meets contemporary" concept, Kuma said it was important that elements of the past and future were visible, including the giant 3,000-litre wooden barrels that are key to Hamada's soy sauce production.



Singapore bak kut teh, prepared by Singaporean chef Chong Wui Choong using Hamada Shoyu sauces.



Baked Lobster with Superior Soy Sauce, prepared by Hong Kong chef Albert Au Kwok Keung.



The soy sauce ice cream (right) was created by Hironari. It is only available at Hamada factory's in-house Usagi Cafe.



Besides its signature soy sauce, Hamada also produces other products such as teriyaki sauce, yuzu dressing, ponzu sauce and premium XO sauce.



Penang loh mee prepared by Malaysian chef Chin Chee Seng using a range of Hamada Shoyu sauces.