

Wednesday, 24 March 2021

Raising the steaks — An exciting new chapter unfolds for Maria's SteakCafé



Angeline in front of Maria's Signature in KLCC with her team.

HER smile serene, the young woman extends her hand in welcome before abruptly pulling it back again, a small chuckle escaping her lips as she realises that we're still in the "new normal" "I'm sorry, I almost forgot!" she says.

Clad in a simple shift dress, accentuated modestly by a mandarin collar, Angeline Tan, the youthful-looking CEO of Maria's SteakCafe, beckons me to follow her into the inner sanctum of Maria's Signature.

It's the brand's recently-opened first flagship restaurant located in Suria KLCC, Kuala Lumpur.

The magnificent vista of the KLCC Park, with its lush greenery and impressive man-made lake with water fountains shooting up water into the skies, comes into view as we emerge from the dimly-lit entrance "lobby" and into the dining area.

Befitting its location in the capital's iconic landmark, Maria's Signature exudes a classy, contemporary feel. The large windows that run the length of the restaurant's dining area allow for natural light to filter in, bathing the space in a lovely, airy glow.



Maria's recently opened signature outlet in KLCC.

"This is our fifth outlet," begins Angeline, the pride palpable in her voice. As we settle down for our chat, I couldn't help remarking that I'd somehow expected to come face to face with someone older at the helm of Maria's.

Her chuckle is soft as Angeline replies: "I'm 35!"

Amused at my surprised expression, the Actuarial Science graduate continues with a smile: "Actually, I was working in Singapore as an actuary after graduating from NTU Nanyang Technological University. But the moment I learnt of my sister's decision to quit the family business to become a housewife after she got married, I decided to return home after completing my three-year bond."

She goes on to share that when her sister decided to step down, her mother contemplated selling the business.

"I thought what a big waste — so I decided to take it up," recalls Angeline, the fourth of five siblings.

Furthermore, she confides shyly, she'd always dreamt of taking over the business ever since she was young.

"When that happened, I saw it as an opportunity to realise my dream. My other siblings already had their own corporate jobs and weren't rushing to do this."
Today, Angeline has been at the helm of the family's business for almost 10 years.

NEW ADVENTURE



Angeline Tan.

Despite the challenges of the present landscape, which has adversely affected many businesses, the soft-spoken Sagittarius remains true to her astrological element of fire: She's unperturbed. And ready to do battle.

Preferring to see opportunities rather than dwell on the gloom, her decision to open Maria's latest outlet is then hardly surprising.

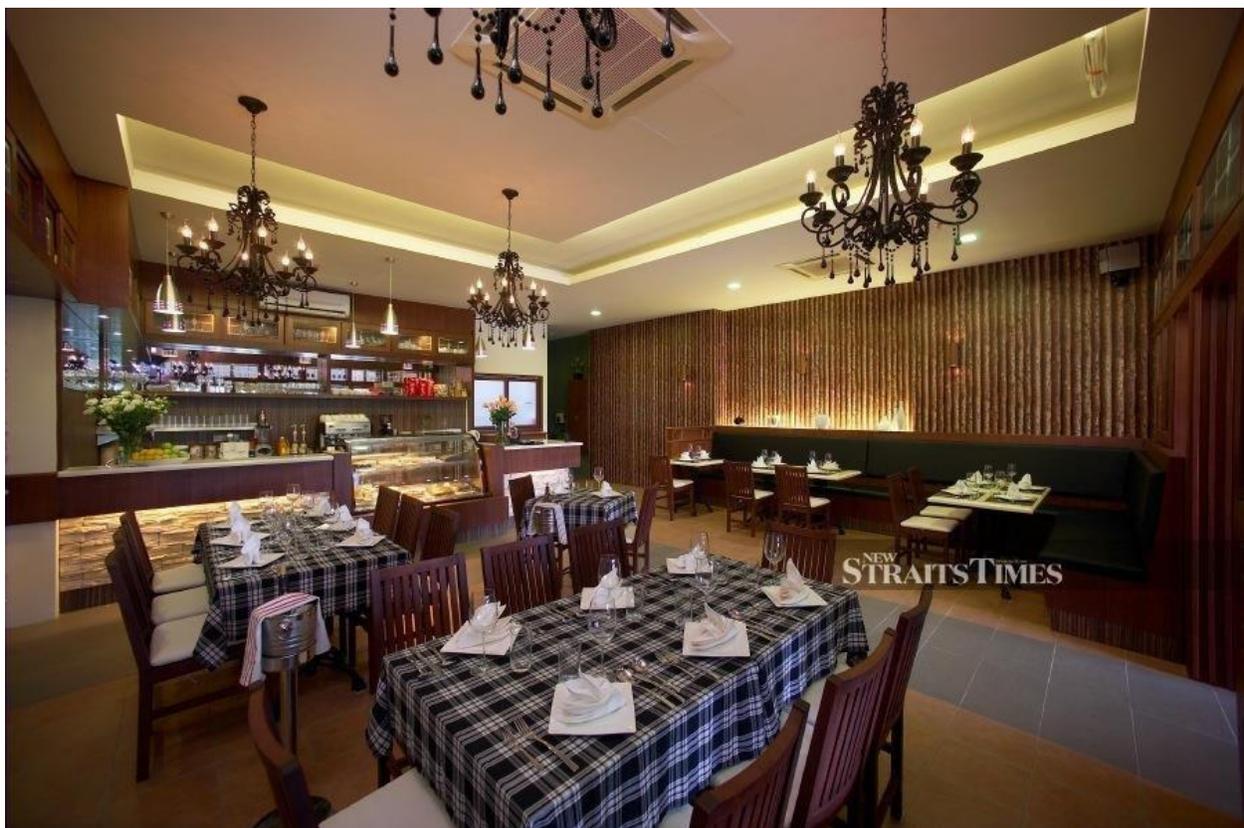
"I won't say that it hasn't been scary," concedes Angeline, brows furrowing as she gathers her thoughts.

Adding, she says: "It has always been at the back of my mind to try and set up the business in KL. It just so happened that the opportunity came during this pandemic. But to be honest, I hadn't considered opening in a mall because I knew it'd be expensive. Funnily enough, it's thanks to the pandemic that we're able to secure a space here!"

Retail space in Suria KLCC has always been highly sought after by retailers.

"The moment we were alerted to the availability of an empty lot, we swooped in," recalls Angeline, adding that the management here were open to giving them a good deal.

"I'd be lying if I said it wasn't scary to bring the business here, especially during these times of uncertainties. But it has been worth it," shares Angeline, before elaborating: "We've been opened since Christmas Day of last year and although business has been erratic, we were lucky to secure a really good crowd during the festive period, including on New Year's day and also Valentine's Day."



The first Maria's to open in the Klang Valley was in Damansara Perdana.

Maria's SteakCafe, a recipient of the World Top Gourmet Award in 2018 by World Gourmet, a platform established to recognise the diversity of the hospitality and F&B industries, currently boasts one outlet in Ipoh and three other outlets in the Klang Valley, namely, in Damansara Perdana, Bangsar, and Sunway. This latest outlet is the brand's first flagship restaurant.

"Our business approach here is similar to the other outlets although there are some differences, which take into account our location and clientele," replies Angeline when asked whether there are major differences between this signature restaurant and their existing outlets.

The first notable difference is in the upscale interior concept, which features dark oak, lux silver grey marble, and intimate plush leather booths complete with dim, atmospheric lighting. A definite highlight is the outdoor patio seating area which overlooks the spectacular dancing fountains at the KLCC Park.

Meanwhile, the other "Maria's" exude a more traditional, rustic and homely feel.

"That's because we're targeting the corporate market here," confides Angeline, adding that with this in mind, they also designed a special cocktail menu for "Happy Hour", which doesn't exist in the other outlets.

Continuing, Angeline shares: "Also, the service level here has been 'upped', the environment is classier and we've even changed the cutleries! If you notice, our side dishes have also been elevated somewhat, for example, where normally we might serve the conventional salad, here, we offer something more premium, like asparagus."

If there's one thing that's a constant, it's their steak. It remains a popular item on the menu. Maria's emphasis on "simply good food" and their promise to deliver honest, fragrant, and thick steak with just the right "doneness" have won them many staunch fans.

Is there a secret to the steak here, I ask, smiling at Angeline as I note her eyes lighting up at the question.

"The customers keep coming back for mum's special seasoning and marination," she replies happily. "We actually have about six different herbs combined inside so there's something for every palate."

In addition, she adds, the method that the steak is cooked also lends to the delicious outcome. "We cook our steak in a very special, high-heat grill so when you bite into the meat, you'll notice that there's a nice crust outside, but the rest remains juicy," shares Angeline, whose favourite steak is the rib eye, a beefsteak from the rib section and a popular choice among diners for its tenderness and flavour.

What fans of Maria's will vouch for is the thickness of the cut.

"Take a rib eye, for example," elaborates Angeline, continuing: "Where other steakhouses might cut their meat pretty thinly, here, the steak is cut into half to ensure that it's thick. You don't have to order a 400g steak to get a thick cut. A 200g one will still give you a thick-cut steak with a nice crust that's really flavourful."

HEARTH AND HEART



A photo of the close-knit family.

The Tan's family story is a warm one. Asked what the heartbeat of Maria's is, the answer is simple: Food. Family. Legacy. The Ipoh-born Angeline recalls an idyllic childhood in Ipoh, with doting, happy-go-lucky parents with a passion for cooking.

"Mum was a homemaker while my father had his own business — in development," shares Angeline, adding: "I think his business went downhill during the financial crisis and that's when he decided to open a restaurant."

Suddenly, turning excitedly to a folder on the table, the 35-year-old asks if she could show me some pictures of her family.

I nod, pleasantly surprised at the request. Black and white photos appear in front of me and I pore over each one, delighting in the nostalgia.

"These are my parents," exclaims Angeline, pointing to a picture of a laughing couple. "They loved parties," she shares, adding: "In Ipoh they were known for being a couple that cooked a lot and threw dinner parties often. When my father's business was still doing well, mum did a lot of charity work and was the president of some charities in Ipoh. But later, as the business went downhill, mum started baking at home."



Angeline's late father, Philip loved cooking and was a whizz in the kitchen.

Her late father, Philip, who was born in Ipoh and had four siblings, loved to cook, shares Angeline proudly. As a young boy, he'd often follow his mother into the kitchen to observe her whenever she cooked.

Smiling fondly, Angeline recalls: "My father had a talent for remembering flavours. He'd create a tiramisu and say that he remembered it from when he was in Italy 10 years before! He would spend hours experimenting until he was able to achieve the flavour that he's looking for." Gingerly picking up another picture, Angeline shares that her now 67-year-old mother, Maria, hailed from a poorer background.

"She cooked a lot when she was younger too. I remember her telling us that she'd have her sister on her hip as she was cooking. After she married my father, she was exposed to a lot of cooking classes. That's when she learnt how to bake from overseas chefs. It wasn't long before it became her passion," says Angeline.

Growing up, the siblings — one boy and four girls — were free to explore the kitchen whenever they wanted. In fact, it was something their parents hugely encouraged the children to do. Recalls Angeline: "I remember my mother would bake a hundred cakes a day with the help of her friends to sell for charity. And whenever she did this, we'd get some pastry or dough to play with and make cookies. My father preferred cooking savouries but he'd make the fillings for the pies while mum made the puff pastry."



The children had an early start in the kitchen.

Her parents, adds Angeline proudly, were also proficient at cooking Asian food and taught the children how to make simple dishes from a young age.

Chuckling, Angeline confides: "When I was in Primary School, I could already cook fried rice. I'd even cook my own lunch sometimes."

Suffice it to say, the heart of the Tan home was truly their kitchen. "My father ensured that he designed it as the biggest space in the house and it was well equipped," shares Angeline, with a chuckle.

Instead of the conventional stove, the family had one of those high-heat stoves normally found in hawker stalls for cooking *Char Kway Teow*, she remembers fondly. "My father always liked to say that he wanted to cook with the aroma from the food!"



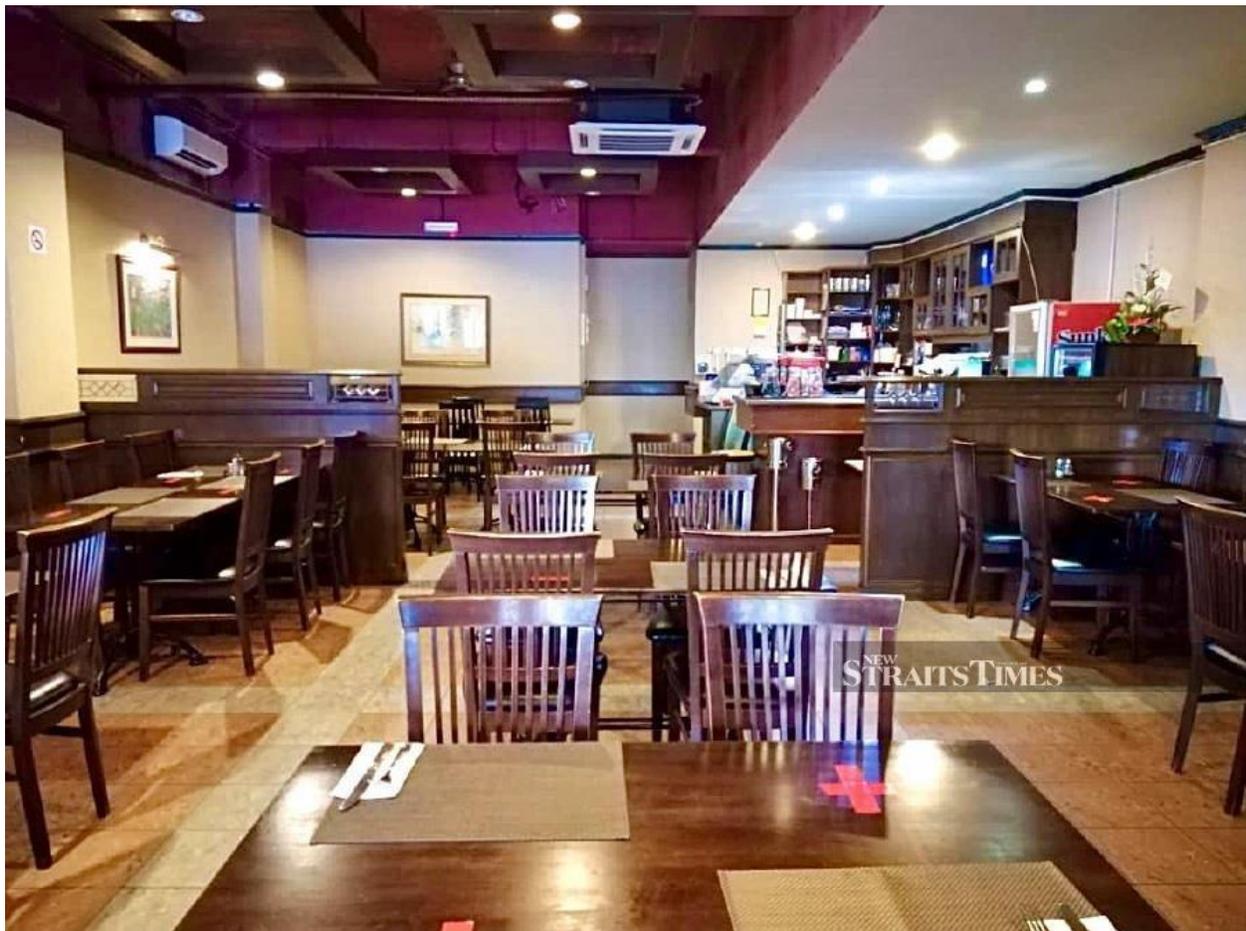
The kitchen was the heart of the house.

Was steak a regular fixture on the dinner table, I couldn't help asking, thinking of the family's claim to fame today.

Angeline, a big fan of self-help books, shakes her head before sharing that they did, however, grow up on a staple of western food.

Eyes lighting up, she recalls: "We'd have pasta, chicken chop, roast chicken, roast lamb etc. My favourite was always the roast lamb, especially when it's fresh out of the oven. I loved the sauce which my parents made from lamb dripping and oil — it was so fragrant. We were very lucky children to have such great food!"

JOURNEY BEGINS



Maria's first outlet is located in Ipoh.

It all started as a home kitchen where matriarch Maria would bake cakes, pies and pastries. It wasn't surprising then that when they decided to open their first outlet in their hometown of Ipoh, they named it Maria's Pies and Pastries.

"Our staple offerings were pies, pastries and coffee," remembers Angeline, adding that it was her elder brother who was in charge of the bar.

"My brother made the coffee. It wasn't local coffee. We used Illy coffee and at that time, we were one of the first restaurants or cafés in Ipoh that had an espresso machine," she adds, smiling.

It so happened that her brother had just completed his SPM when the restaurant opened so he was roped in to work there with his three best friends.

While they ran the show at the front, mum Maria would be in the kitchen and dad Philip handled the supervisors, chefs and overall operations.

Barely 15 when the first outlet opened its doors, Angeline remembers: "Back then, because we were the first cafe to have a coffee machine, it was always packed. Interestingly, Ipoh people liked their Italian coffee. My brother, who picked up his barista skills from the suppliers, used to tell me that he made so many cups of cappuccino and latte in a day!"

Business was so good that the family decided to broaden their horizons and venture to Kuala Lumpur. By this time, Philip had passed away and it was up to mum, Maria, and Angeline's newly graduated elder sister to forge on.

"That's when we opened the outlet in Damansara Perdana," says Angeline, adding that as her mother had moved temporarily to Kuala Lumpur to be nearer their new venture, her brother took over the running of their Ipoh outlet.

"The Damansara Perdana outlet shared the same concept except for the fact that we brought in more premium beef as it was easier to find better quality beef and suppliers in KL."

Asked why steak became their signature draw, Angeline replies simply: "Because it's what the customers want."

Adding, she shares: "We had customers coming from as far as Rawang to our Damansara Perdana branch just to eat our beef, which were all imported from Australia."

Chuckling, the trained actuary confides that when she first got on board, her knowledge of meats was pretty shallow.

"I started from scratch," she exclaims, adding: "Even to this day, I'm still learning. There's just so much to learn!"

CONTINUING THE LEGACY



Angeline Tan is unfazed by challenges.

As her eyes travel towards the view beyond the windows, resting contentedly on the bustle building up outside as the lunch time crowd begins to swell, a sudden lull descends on our hitherto animated chat.

I take the opportunity to take a quick sip of my tea and study the young woman in front of me.

There's something about the 35-year-old that's both earnest and endearing. I'm sure that underneath all that demureness lies a steely determination, I silently muse to myself as Angeline slowly peels her eyes away from the windows and throws yet another serene smile in my direction.

"Since I've taken over the reins, mum has returned to Ipoh to run the restaurant with her team. She's there on most nights. I don't think she can let go of her 'baby'," says Angeline, her chuckles slicing through my reverie.

Her mother, she shares, continues to check on their various outlets from time to time.

"She'd make a beeline for the kitchen the moment she arrives and scrutinise everything. It can be quite scary! But it's also good because she'd offer comments on how we can further improve."

Although matriarch Maria is no longer at the helm, the business is in good hands. Angeline's determined for her mother's legacy to live on.

Says the driven Sagittarius: "I've no plans to make any drastic changes in terms of the menu because I know that customers come here seeking mum's recipes. What I would improve on, however, is our service level, ambiance and our marketing strategy."



NZ Lamb Cutlets.

That said, every few months customers can look forward to something new, whether it's a promotion or new side dishes added in. The cocktails for "Happy Hour" at Maria's Signature is one such feature.

Suffice it to say, the steak dishes remain. Recently Maria's introduced a Japanese Wagyu Burger, comprising a juicy patty made completely from 100 per cent pure Japanese Wagyu A5 beef.

Next month, they're looking to launch a T-bone (beef cut from the short loin) steak served in a sizzling hot plate.

Her objective, from the day she took her place in the family business and decided to steer it into the new era, remains the same, declares Angeline.

"It's simple," she says, expression earnest. "I don't want the taste of my parents' food to just disappear. I want people to be able to enjoy the kind of food and flavours that I got to enjoy when I was growing up. This is very precious to me."

The bustle of the lunchtime crowd seems to have subsided and a calm has descended on the KLCC Park. A quick glance at my watch and I realise that I have to leave soon. Final question, I signal to my affable host. Angeline nods, her smile gracious.

What motivates you? Angeline pauses to reflect on the question before replying: "Incremental progress. It can be small progressions but as long as I can see that there are improvements in anything I do, I get excited. I'm also motivated by the relationships that I've built with my team. Seeing them progress and develop fuel me."

intanm@nst.com.my

For more information on the outlets, menu and running promotions, go to www.marias.com.my.

WRITER'S TOP PICKS



Spicy Mussels doused in spicy Siciliana sauce.

Spicy Mussels — Have always been a fan of mussels for its faintly sweet, mushroom-like undertone. Maria's delicious spicy mussels dish is generously doused in spicy Italian Siciliana sauce that you can mop up with the accompanying crusty garlic bread. Super *sedap* (delicious)!



Australian Grainfed Hereford Rib Eye served with mashed potatoes.

Hereford Rib Eye — One of the best-selling items on the menu, the Rib Eye is served with garlic butter to enrich the beef's natural flavour. The dish, which comes with onion strings, mashed potato and wild rocket, is really juicy and flavourful. Lamb lovers can check out the tender New Zealand Lamb Cutlets, which come in a set of three and accompanied by delicious mint sauce.



Japanese Wagyu A5 Burger served with steakhouse fries.

Japanese Wagyu Burger — This is one of the recently introduced items. Although I'm not a big burger fan, I was in seventh heaven biting into the exquisitely juicy and meaty patty made of from premium Japanese Wagyu A5 beef.



Atlantic White Cod served with sake sauce.

Atlantic White Cod — For non-meat fans, check out the Atlantic White Cod dish which is super smooth and soft. Normally served with sake sauce, it can be replaced with Maria's homemade tangerine sauce for Muslim customers. There's also homemade Fish & Chips and Grilled Salmon Fillet on the menu too.

(Source: <https://www.nst.com.my/lifestyle/sunday-vibes/2021/03/675704/raising-steaks-%E2%80%94-exciting-new-chapter-unfolds-marias-steakcafe>)