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Table set for festive dine-in at home



Shangri La Hotel, Kuala Lumpur has adjusted its offerings and prices to cater to local demand.

CHINESE restaurants and hotels had been gearing up to serve dine-in meals for the lunar new year celebrations this year — until the movement control order 2.0 was implemented.

With only takeaway and delivery allowed, they had to quickly change their menus and business model barely a month before Chinese New Year.

StarMetro speaks to several operators to find out how the food and beverage (F&B) businesses have adapted, including lessons learnt from last year's MCO.

From special warmer bags to instruction cards for reheating, those in the business have come up with creative ways to transfer the premium dining experience to the home environment.

They are also offering complimentary delivery service, mobilising their staff to personally hand deliver orders and setting up drive-through counters to make self-pickup a breeze, especially for the all-important reunion dinner.

Ready for reunion

Bandar Sri Damansara resident Zohrab Chong made tentative plans for his family's Chinese New Year reunion dinner in December, and would be confirming his festive orders since the MCO was extended to Feb 18.

"We will be having a mix of home-cooked dishes and ordering takeaway such as meat dishes from a local entrepreneur and yee sang from a hotel," said the consultant and trainer.

"We have been ordering a lot more takeaway and delivery over the past year, partly to support local businesses and also to take a break from cooking at home."

Chong's reunion dinner will only be kept to five persons, including his sister who stays in the same neighbourhood.

"We used to return to my hometown in Alor Setar, Kedah, for Chinese New Year every year.

"Our reunion meals were quite elaborate as it involved three extended families, including several members from overseas.

"The families decided to scale down the celebrations when inter-state and international travel weren't allowed," he said.

There are also other deciding factors, such as not wanting to expose Chong's 92-year-old grandmother to unnecessary risks and his daughter is sitting for her Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia examination from Feb 22 onwards.

M. Ho had already booked an order of yee sang from a Chinese restaurant for her mother's birthday, which coincided with Valentine's Day.

"Feb 14 happens to also be the third day of Chinese New Year," said the social worker.

"I have already confirmed and paid for my order for a group of four, since I know it will be a busy weekend and don't want to leave things to the last minute."

And in addition to the Chinese New Year treat, Ho also plans to order a special Peranakan sugree birthday cake to round off the meal.



The Oriental Group has developed retail care and gift packs as well as improved on its takeaway packages.

Packed with care

Even before the MCO was announced on Jan 13, The Oriental Group was in risk management mode to be prepared for any situation.

“While we were optimistic that dine-in would be allowed during Chinese New Year, we were aware of the increasing trend of customers ordering our dishes to eat at home,” said operations general manager (external affairs) Lyn Siew.

“We suffered after banquets were not allowed last year, as a huge chunk of our revenue came from them.

“The level of dine-in depended on government mandates, hence business has not been at its peak for many months,” she said.

Despite the shortfall, Siew said the group had taken a bullish approach to generate revenue through non-traditional means, such as launching its own e-commerce platform, namely www.orientaltoyu.com, using third-party sales portals and venturing into Facebook Live.

The group also developed care and gift packs such as poon choy, and improved on their takeaway packages while not compromising their food quality and brand image.

“Our takeaway dishes are carefully chosen from our dine-in menus to ensure they are takeaway-friendly.

“To ensure freshness, bulk takeaways are packed in our specially designed warmer bags that keep food warm during the transportation process.

“Customers are advised to consume the food immediately upon delivery,” she said.

In addition to its food delivery partners, she said Oriental Group also had an internal team comprising front-of-house personnel who would personally deliver takeaway purchases to loyal customers, while adhering to the highest hygiene and safety standards.

Siew said her team learned a lot from last year’s MCO, from coming up with creative marketing efforts to versatile business and menu strategies to adapt to extraordinary circumstances.

“We are extremely grateful to our loyal customers who have supported us throughout the years. “It is during these challenging times that we enforce our core principle, which is to continue to deliver the best of Chinese cuisine in every circumstance.”



The festive set menus at Sheraton Petaling Jaya Hotel's Yue Chinese restaurant were developed in a certain way to maintain their quality.

Drive-through service

Sheraton Petaling Jaya Hotel drew up two plans for its Chinese New Year menu — one for dine-in, another for takeaway and delivery.

“We were cognisant that even if dine-in was to be permitted, some guests would still be cautious about going out during this period,” said Sheraton Petaling Jaya Hotel general manager Angela Fox.

“So, Yue Chinese Restaurant created options for takeaway and delivery. There are set menus with signature dishes, yee sang, poon choy and festive hampers.”

Yue's festive set menus were developed to maintain their quality.

“The items are pre-cooked and packed separately from the gravy and garnishing,” said Fox.

“Each set is accompanied by an instruction card on how to reheat the food as well as suggestions on how to add garnishing and present the dishes, to make them as good as having them at the restaurant itself.”

In addition to its website and food delivery app, the hotel has a dedicated WhatsApp line for F&B orders so they can quickly respond to customers' needs.

“To ensure a smooth delivery service, some orders are taken 24 hours in advance for us to book riders a day before the delivery, ” said Fox. “We mobilise our team to dispatch orders to nearby areas that are within 10km.

“We also have the advantage of an easily accessible location and ample space on our driveway to operate a drive-through service.

“We have set up a desk at our ground floor, so guests can simply drive by to collect their orders and make payment.

“It is a very low-contact experience, and they don’t need to leave their vehicles.”

As business was affected by the lack of dine-in revenue, Fox said the hotel needed to ensure it had a variety of dishes and promotions in place to continue attracting guests.

“One of our most important areas of focus is our Marriott Commitment to Clean.

“This is a comprehensive programme, covering everything from staff hygiene practices to sanitisation processes, ” she added.



Sofitel Kuala Lumpur Damansara handles food deliveries itself and does not rely on external delivery companies.

Complimentary delivery

Sofitel Kuala Lumpur Damansara had to change its initial plan of reopening its Chinese restaurant, Wan Chun Ting, for lunar new year dine-ins when the MCO was extended.

“Wan Chun Ting has been closed since March 2020 due to the Covid-19 pandemic. When the government imposed the MCO, we had no choice but to stick strictly to takeout and delivery, ” said Sofitel Kuala Lumpur Damansara general manager Franck Loison.

“In light of the MCO, the initial dine-in menu was rendered obsolete.

“Our culinary teams had to change their plans by offering meals with multiple portions instead of single-portion dishes, and roll out delivery services.”

He noted that the pandemic had shifted the whole dynamics of the restaurant business, with customers adapting to takeaway and delivery services due to travel restrictions and safety precautions.

Sofitel KL handles food deliveries themselves and does not use external delivery companies as a safety precaution and to maintain its high standard.

“We offer complimentary delivery to destinations within 10km from the hotel and a minimum fee to destinations beyond 10km, ” said Loison.

“We have invested in take-home containers that help to preserve the warm or cool nature of the food until it is ready for consumption.

“We are also using a food warmer to keep food warm or cold consistently and for extended periods of time.”

He said the hotel was approaching the situation with a positive and proactive mindset to stay afloat and at the same time adapt to customers’ changing behaviour.

“We have to make changes that have a purposeful impact and not just for the current conditions, ” said Loison.

“We will be preparing for future changes to be implemented in our restaurants’ business module to generate additional revenue in the post-Covid-19 economy.”



The culinary team at Mandarin Oriental, Kuala Lumpur cooking and packing customers' orders.

Elevating the experience

For Mandarin Oriental, Kuala Lumpur F&B director Kai Jansen, hotels must never lose sight of their primary aim.

“The nature of a hotel business is to have guests experience the service, ambience and leave with a great feeling.

“As a team, we try to learn from the current situation and adapt to the changes as fast as possible, so we also look at other ways to still bring a part of Mandarin Oriental to our guests.”

In light of the MCO, he said the hotel had added its Chinese New Year collection to its online shop, which included Lai Po Heen restaurant’s popular yee sang, set menus and gift sets.

“As Chinese New Year draws closer, the yee sang has proven to be a bestseller, with many choosing to deliver to family members or colleagues whom they are unable to see at this point in time, or simply to savour at home.

“We have also added some of our year-round a la carte dishes that have become a favourite among regular guests.”

Aside from having a culinary team that is able to meet food orders, Jansen believes it is equally important to work with a business partner that understands the implications of gourmet food delivery.

“Our array of takeaway Chinese food items is carefully selected to ensure we are still able to fully deliver on the quality that Lai Po Heen is known for.”

He acknowledged that the pandemic had a big impact on the hotel’s business model.

Not adapting to the situation would not only leave the hotel at a huge disadvantage, it would also affect the income of their staff. “We try to adapt and enhance our existing capabilities to drive revenue where possible,” Jansen added.

Catering to locals

Though its initial plans were to encourage dine-ins for Chinese New Year celebrations, the MCO meant that Shangri-La Hotel, Kuala Lumpur had to shift its focus to takeaway and delivery.

“Covid-19 gave us the opportunity to reflect, diversify and drive innovation,” said the hotel’s communications director Neena Dewi.

“Offering takeaway allows guests to enjoy the Shangri-La dining experience at home.

“Very quickly, we started to see orders for local favourites from Lemon Garden, Lemon Garden 2Go, Shang Palace and Zipangu restaurants.

“Since our F&B market is driven by local consumers, we have adapted the pricing and offers to cater to local demand, featuring great deals, value for money and excellent quality.

“With the Chinese New Year celebration coming up, we continue to expect strong demand from regulars and new customers alike,” she said.

Riders are booked ahead for orders done through third-party apps to secure their services and ensure food is delivered on time.

“For orders placed directly with the hotel, we assign a team member to ride along with the delivery process. This is to show our care and ensure the delivery process is as per the SOP,” said Neena. “Instead of single-use plastic, compostable paper boxes are our preferred choice for packaging. “This helps keep the heat in and allows enough air circulation to prevent the food from becoming soggy.”

She said last year’s MCO and subsequent versions taught the team to get the packaging right for deliveries and decide on a price point that worked for a wider demographic of customers.

“The team already has a strong knowledge of what our customer base prefers to see on their delivery menu. Getting these elements right have helped us provide memorable dining experiences to our guests,” she added.

(Source: <https://www.thestar.com.my/metro/metro-news/2021/02/04/table-set-for-festive-dine-in-at-home>)