

# RECRUIT

The business of hospitality

## Mastering the art of service

Restaurateur and Cornell alumnus Diana Cheng (right) tells Lyn Chan how the course has helped her to manage her business with more passion.

AFTER one successful restaurant and two subsequent failures, Ms Diana Cheng, the managing director of My Mum's Cuisine Group, knew something was lacking in her management skills.

She was about to sign up for a local MBA course when her former Singapore Polytechnic (SP) lecturer told that the master of management in hospitality programme at Cornell University's School of Hotel Administration would be more appropriate.

Though she did not know then how prestigious the institution was, she applied for a place there and got it. It turned out to be her best business decision ever.

Since returning to Singapore after her completing the course in 2001 at the age of 31, she has expanded her "baby", My Mum's Cuisine, into a "brood" of five food and beverage (F&B) outlets: My Mum's Cuisine, three Noodle Hut restaurants and Heng Café.

She is known in the industry for her exacting service standards. Her staff turnover rate has decreased over the years, with about half of her 107 employees having stayed with her for the past three years — no mean feat considering the fickleness of Singapore's F&B industry.

Also, annual revenue has also grown six times since her first foray into the business.

"A good restaurant concept is important but an outlet cannot survive on a concept alone. You



PHOTO: JAMIE KOH

need good service. In Singapore, training is especially important as I feel that we are not naturally service-oriented people, and most of us do not have an innate sense of hospitality," she explained.

The self-proclaimed goal-oriented entrepreneur admitted that she herself is not a people person and that it took discipline and will-power to accept that the customer is always right — even when he is not, a service mantra which her Cornell classes advocated.

So after experiencing the frustration of countless customer complaints, poor service attitudes and restaurant managers who upped and left her company for higher salaries, she opted to extensively train her staff, putting them in rotational roles to expose them to various facets of the business, as well as enhance internal promotion opportunities.

Thanks to her lessons on revenue management, one policy she is relentless about is that My Mum's Cuisine does not offer promotions with credit cards

(except for SP alumni cards, as she's a SP graduate), unlike the competition.

She explained: "When people come to my restaurant, it means that they are willing to pay my prices.

"It's all about selling the right product to the right customer at the right time at the right place at the right price."

Even though she has done well, Ms Cheng admitted she had to struggle to adapt American concepts to the local context.

"I don't always make the right

decisions. In a course like Cornell's, you learn to make the best decisions based on your learning and the circumstances. For instance, I lost almost \$1 million in a restaurant venture in a year. I cut my losses and got out."

Ms Cheng attributes 80 per cent of her achievements so far to the Cornell programme she enrolled in, which taught her that "passion is still the key driver" and that the hospitality business is more an art than a science, even with all the top-notch skills and techniques.