

BUSINESS

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SINGAPORE'S HEADLINE INFLATION IN NOVEMBER, A SIX-MONTH LOW **C2**

Going overseas to be farmers

Farming is a far-fetched notion in land-scarce Singapore, but that has not stopped some entrepreneurial Singaporeans from venturing overseas to pursue their agrarian dreams. Those dreams are driven by a variety of factors, from easing food security concerns to a taste for fresh produce to creating jobs for locals in their host countries. **Aw Cheng Wei** reports.

No chickening out of starting poultry farm

Whether wiring up the electricity grid or ensuring that the chickens had drinking water, no task proved too menial when Ms Lam Shu Mei set up Rwanda's first modern poultry farm in 2014.

But being hands-on was a big part of the former advertising industry employee's plan to get on top of what looked like a daunting challenge.

She says: "I could have hired someone to do it, but I wouldn't have learnt anything."

Ms Lam, who set up Poultry East Africa, first visited Rwanda in 2011 with her late father, Mr Larry Lam, and fell in love with the Land of a Thousand Hills, a reference to the country's rolling terrain.

Mr Lam, the founder and former chairman of port operations and engineering company Portek, wanted to give back to communities that had contributed to his business.

He died in 2014, but Ms Lam wanted to fulfil her father's wish of focusing on social impact projects.

That was why "giving up was never an option" even when the going was tough, she says.

One problem was finding and buying flat land that was spacious enough to start the farm.

"We needed to pick an area that was not hilly and was close enough to the city, for logistics reasons," Ms Lam says. She found a suitable plot in Bugesera district – a 40-minute drive from the capital Kigali – but



Ms Lam Shu Mei at her Rwanda chicken farm, which she set up to fulfil her father's wish of focusing on social impact projects. PHOTO: COURTESY OF LAM SHU MEI

trying to arrange a meeting with the owners proved difficult.

The land had been divided into small, family-owned plots of roughly half a hectare each because of the country's inheritance laws.

In order to buy the 25ha she needed, Ms Lam, who is based in Singapore, had to ensure that every member of the 50 or so families was present at the notary office to sign off on the sale agreements.

"It's not a big country, but people are all over the place," she says.

Finalising the plans for the farm, which can house 48,000 birds in various sheds, was also an arduous task. "There wasn't any existing modern poultry farm, so we had to do everything from scratch."

Ms Lam had to source materials from other countries, including China, India and South Africa.

The problems did not end there: Setting up the farm's infrastructure took time and effort as well, including connecting water and electricity.

"Every day, we used about 20, 30 cubic m of water for cleaning and drinking water for the chickens. This was a huge problem for us," she says.

"In 2014, there was a water shortage, so we had to rent tubs... go to the nearest well and wait for the water to pump."

She also had to learn how to connect to an electricity grid. "I didn't even know what a transformer was," she says.

And that was all before the team

started rearing and selling the chickens, which brought about different problems, such as ensuring a steady supply of feed, negotiating with numerous small cooperatives and finding skilled labour.

Ms Lam has invested about \$2.5 million in the farm, which has 75 workers. She has broken even since operations began in December 2014.

She has also built a processing plant. "We purchase the live birds from local farmers, process them and distribute them under our brand," she says. "This ensures access to market for small-scale farmers and reduces wastage, (and ensures) fair pricing... for them."

It also marks a move towards a contract farming model, which can help keep local farmers in business, Ms Lam says. "(Farmers) may not necessarily want to build processing plants, given their smaller sizes," she adds.

"Instead of competing with these local farmers... we try to bring them under the same umbrella to create a win-win situation."



Former civil servant Lai Poon Piau's 10ha pepper farm in Kampot, in south-western Cambodia, now has 20,000 vines, which were first harvested last year and yielded a tonne of peppers. PHOTO: COURTESY OF LAI POON PIAU

Driven by worry over S'pore's food security

Shovelling manure to make fertiliser, weeding and organising harvests keep former civil servant Lai Poon Piau pretty flat out when he is on his pepper farm in Kampot in south-western Cambodia.

Mr Lai visits the 10ha farm, where he grows Kampot peppercorn, every other month and stays for a week each time.

When harvest season rolls around between April and June, he stays for up to two weeks.

"Every day, I come back (to the farm house) with my clothes stained, tired but also relaxed. It's meaningful manual work, working with hands," says Mr Lai, 53.

Becoming a farmer was his way of continuing a legacy passed down from his grandfather to his father, who owned rubber plantations in Malaysia.

His cousins still run the plantations in southern Johor.

Mr Lai, a father of two undergraduates, jokes that his wife, an accountant based in Japan, considers his pepper passion project a mid-life crisis.

But his decision to start a farm – and subsequently a brand called Hong Spices – was driven by concern over Singapore's food secu-

rity. "Singapore is vulnerable when it comes to food safety... We don't grow our own food," he says.

Mr Lai first started looking for land when he was in a corporate position in the oil and gas industry in 2006.

When he left that job in 2009, the civil service offered him a position, but he always knew he was going to start his own farm.

In 2016, he left his government post to focus on his pepper project.

He wanted to play to the region's strength by growing Kampot pepper because the World Trade Organisation (WTO) recognises the

area as a special place to grow the spice.

The WTO also recognises Champagne in France and Tequila in Mexico among other speciality-related locations.

But buying land in Cambodia was not easy. In 2008, Mr Lai lost \$180,000 when he bought some acreage through a middleman who was trying to flip it.

"The middleman could not get the owner to sell, and he had already spent the deposit I gave him," Mr Lai says.

Taking the agent to court would have been too expensive and a long-drawn-out process, he adds.

Thankfully, he met a local partner through the setback, and the two have been working together to build the pepper farm since then. They started with 6,000 vines in 2014 and now have 20,000.

The vines, which take three years to mature, were first harvested last year and yielded a tonne of peppers that are now being sold to restaurants and retailers.

Mr Lai is also selling the peppers through the Hong Spices website and online stores Handpicked.sg and Lazada.

He hopes Hong Spices, which now has eight full-time workers in Cambodia, can show that regional produce can be of high quality and to instil in buyers a sense of pride in using products made in Asia.

"We buy the best steak but we (tend to) put the cheapest pepper on it," Mr Lai says.

MEANINGFUL WORK

Every day, I come back (to the farm house) with my clothes stained, tired but also relaxed. It's meaningful manual work, working with hands.



FORMER CIVIL SERVANT LAI POON PIAU



Mrs Cynthia Wee-Hoefer planted the first batch of heirloom rice in late October at her farm in Illuketia, Sri Lanka, and hopes to harvest about 1,000kg of milled rice by next month. PHOTO: COURTESY OF CYNTHIA WEE-HOEFER

Preserving grains of Sri Lankan heritage

Former journalist Cynthia Wee-Hoefer reckons being a farmer in Sri Lanka is a chance to preserve part of the South Asian country's heritage.

Mrs Wee-Hoefer, 67, is growing heirloom rice, one of the nation's oldest exports, but one that is losing favour with the locals.

"Local farmers were growing rice that the (Sri Lankan) government issued them," she says, adding that the rice given to farmers had a shorter growing time and was harder than heirloom rice.

"I thought it was such a pity. This is a country known for its heirloom rice, but people were not growing it."

With the help of locals, Mrs Wee-Hoefer planted the first batch of heirloom rice in late October at her farm in Illuketia, in the southern part of the country. The grains should be ready in three months.

"The rice varieties I am experimenting with have beautiful names: bird's beak, feather rice and fragrant rice," she adds.

Mrs Wee-Hoefer, a Singaporean, and her husband, German photographer Hans Hoefer, bought a 4.85ha plot of land in 1995 where

they run a six-bed villa called Apa Villa Illuketia.

"When we first saw the land, there was so much flora and fauna. There were overgrown, mature trees and wildlife galore," she says.

"There were giant monitor lizards, snakes, monkeys, peacocks and porcupines."

They built Apa Villa Illuketia and hired staff to run it.

In 2014, the couple, who have two children, bought the surrounding 0.8ha padi fields when local farmers approached them for the sale.

Staff at the villa help with the padi fields, a bee colony and a greenhouse that the couple set up

SHARING TASTY PRODUCE

I had gone into farming because I really like how natural produce tastes, and I want to share it with others.



FORMER JOURNALIST CYNTHIA WEE-HOEFER

to grow fruits and vegetables such as okra, kang kong and tomatoes.

They also grow tea.

Mrs Wee-Hoefer, who lives in Singapore, visits every few months to ensure operations are running smoothly.

By next month, she hopes to harvest about 1,000kg of milled rice. The yield will be split three ways: for use at Apa Villa Illuketia, donations to poor families, and to a local grocer for sale.

This is the second time Mrs Wee-Hoefer and her husband have tried their hand at agriculture. They had a 4ha plot in Nepal where they grew peach trees and beans, among other vegetables and fruits. They sold the land last year to a local family.

"I'm more involved in the operations in Sri Lanka now," she says, adding that she has been running cooking classes at the villa and creating the menu at its restaurant.

"I've also been reading books and looking up on the Internet on farming methods."

Mrs Wee-Hoefer wants to bring her rice into Singapore. "But there are regulations," she says.

Currently, she has licences to import fresh and processed produce like honey, dried fruit and walnuts from Nepal and Sri Lanka, but rice requires another licence.

"I had gone into farming because I really like how natural produce tastes, and I want to share it with others," she adds. "Most importantly, I know where my food is from."