

Weekend

THE BUSINESS TIMES

Apr 8-9 2017

THIS HERE IS MY LAND

Singaporean
Farmers
Overseas

WEEKEND FOOD
**Meating The
Satay Master**

WEEKEND INTERVIEW
Travis Chia
Managing Director of Alcohol Delivery



GROWING GLOBAL

Still growing kai lan in your backyard? Be inspired to do more by four Singaporeans who have started their own farms overseas.

by TAY SUAN CHIANG



PHOTOS: HONG SPICES, BENJAMIN GOH, MAY CHEVALIER, SAMANTHA TAN

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WeekendFeature

SPICE GUY

TUCKED in a shelf in Dempsey's COMO Marketplace – which curates artisanal food products from Asia – is a range of Kampot peppercorns from Cambodia, promising to do for pepper what Himalayan pink sea salt has done for table salt. Available in white, pink and black, the Kampot peppercorn is the latest in trendy seasonings, with a delicate flavour profile that's slightly sweet with a lingering finish, not the one-note nose tickling variety.

What you don't expect is that Kampot pepper is owned by Singaporean Lai Poon Piau, a former civil servant wanting to re-connect with his farming heritage. His grandfather and father were rubber and oil palm plantation owners in Malacca, while his cousins are third-generation plantation owners in Johor. He spent his childhood playing on his father's rubber plantation.

Worried about the emphasis on high-tech industries — “Even economies that are agrarian-based are moving out of agriculture into 'higher value' industries” – Mr Lai wants to make a difference by farming his own crops. “I want to grow food crops but my limited resources don't allow me to acquire enough land to make this a viable option,” he says, so



he's starting with cash crops first. Hence peppercorns, which he sells under his brand, Hong Spices.

Mr Lai, 52, started his pepper farm from scratch in 2013. Hong Spices' parent company Acorn Investments owns 80 hectares of land in Kampot, Cambodia, but only 15 hectares were used to develop the farm. There are about 10,000 posts with

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LAI POON PIAU

20,000 pepper vines growing on them. The vines are grown from cuttings bought from surrounding farms. The cuttings take three years to mature.

The vines produce about 50 to 100 tonnes of dried peppercorns annually, and are harvested from March till June. “We can potentially expand the farm to cultivate about 150,000 posts of pepper vines,” says Mr Lai.

Kampot peppercorns are sold from S\$12 to S\$23 per 100g at COMO Marketplace. According to him, white peppercorns have notes of citrus and herbs; red peppercorns have a fruity flavour; while black peppercorns have robust herb flavours.

While his family was supportive, they warned him of the challenges of such a project. But “I decided on farming as a way to leave a lasting legacy for successive generations, like my grandfather and father did for my generation. This was also a chance for me to get back to my family's roots as plantation owners.”

Among his challenges: getting a clear idea of how pepper should be grown. “The knowledge is with just a handful of people and language difficulties made it worse,” he says. However, he was able to find people who would share their expertise. He also has a Cambodian partner, Thin Sao, who helped ensure that the land was purchased in an ethical manner and that the farm met all regulations.

Mr Lai spends a week every month on the farm, where work starts from 7am to 5pm. During harvest season, he is there for almost three weeks.

So far, Morsels and Labyrinth restaurants use his pepper. “Singaporeans are foodies, but Kampot pepper is still a niche gourmet product,” he says. To get the word out, he plans to collaborate with more chefs in Singapore and take part in pop-up food events.

Despite his passion for the pepper project, he misses the friendship and support network of his former corporate life, and “most of all, the steady income”. His wife still works full-time and they have some savings.

“My biggest concern is the uncertainty of where and when the next order will come. 2017 will be a pivotal year for us as we bring our product to market,” he says.