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Best food forward

By CATHERINE SIOW

From hamburger patties to dinner entrees and restaurant delicacies, Lynn Lye makes it a point to know every ingredient that goes into the preparation of a dish. The food engineer then does a culinary "mix-and-match" to come up with a new product that is better, and one that keeps up with current trends.

Lye, 27, is senior R&D project manager at a global food manufacturing company based in Pennsylvania in the United States, and she aims to satisfy discerning foodies, and hopes to see more of her "creations" served at restaurants worldwide.

In a recent interview by e-mail, Lye, who hails from Petaling Jaya, talks about her passion.

What made you go into this line of work?

I really enjoy working with food products. In my job, I get to develop new food products for restaurants, right from conceptualisation to commercialisation. This entails researching the ingredients, availability of resources, processing ingredients in the plant, troubleshooting operations, and making sure all the processes and procedures are followed thoroughly – from conception to production - until it reaches the restaurants.

Why did you choose to work with food?

Food is one of the main necessities in life. Everyone has to eat. Food will always be a major priority that needs to be researched and developed.

When did you first realise this was your "dream career"?

I was halfway through a Mechanical Engineering course in university when I felt it wasn't what I wanted to pursue for my future. I decided to switch to Food Engineering. I took a couple of food courses and everything fell into place. I also worked for the Food Technology Center in Oklahoma State University as a research assistant while I was completing my degree. That really strengthened my knowledge of food development. One of my pet projects then was making peanut butter slices. This was similar to a slice of cheese but made wholly with peanut butter. The idea was to come up with a convenient way to travel with peanut butter, and make it easier for children to spread peanut butter.

Who inspired you to take up this passion?

My greatest inspiration is Ricky Lye – my dad. He used to cook every day when we were young. He loved cooking big meals, and would invite friends and relatives over to enjoy his home-prepared spread. Those days, I had a choice of either washing the dishes or helping him cook. I chose the latter because washing up was the least of my favourite things to do, even now. I started out with peeling garlic and onions, and chopping and pounding chilli. My skills grew from there. Because of my dad, I now know how to cook well, and take Malaysian flavours into my home and my work. My Caucasian husband Jonathan Michael and my colleagues love the Malaysian dishes I whip up for them.

How do you get ideas for your work/projects?

I get ideas by trying out new food, going to new restaurants in different regions, visiting international restaurants, cooking up dishes with new ingredients, intermixing flavours and

creation fusion between flavours and ingredients.

What are some of your major projects?

After graduating, I started work with Wayne Farms LLC in Atlanta, Georgia in 2000. I helped develop flavoured diced chicken for many of the selections in Campbell Soups, dinner entrees for Weight Watchers, Heinz Frozen Dinners, and restaurant entrees throughout the United States. Most of these projects take six months to two years to complete. You can find some of the items which I developed in canned soups, and also in the frozen section of supermarkets. In 2002, I joined Keystone Foods in Philadelphia. I developed most of the chicken menu items for McDonald's Corporate that you find in the States. Some of the items are the New Chicken Nuggets, Grill Chicken Salad, and Chicken Select Strips. The newly launched Chicken Select Strips was one of my best projects, and has been well received by consumers since it went into the market.

What gives you the greatest joy in your work?

To see food products that I had worked on show up in restaurants, and supermarkets. To hear comments like how much people enjoy the product.

What are some of the challenges you face?

A constant challenge is predicting what consumers like or don't like. Everyone has different tastes, and when we develop a new item, we have to take into consideration what kind of consumers we are targeting – whether it is for children, women, men, or teenagers. Other criteria include the target market, when to launch, age bracket group, and publicity. Some products take years to develop, and yet they fail when they reach the consumers. Some products take just a few months to develop, and become very successful.

What do you miss most about Malaysia?

My husband and I try to come back to Malaysia as often as we can. Our last trip home was in 2002. I miss the friendly Malaysian culture, eating out at the *mamak* stalls and going for night snacks at the *pasar malam* (night market). But, most of all, I miss the people – my family, relatives and friends, and of course, my dad's cooking!

I grew up eating the best and authentic Nyonya and Teochew food! My entire family are great cooks. My father whips up the meanest and spiciest Nyonya cuisines. My mother, who passed away two years ago, used to cook the most delicate Teochew specialities. Even my 21-year-old brother William and my 11-year-old sister Hwei Mynn have learned the art of cooking.

What are your future plans?

I would like to expand my culinary skills and learn how to prepare food from different countries, get more involved in the management aspect of the business, and to see more products that I have developed flow into the restaurants, both in the domestic market and internationally.

Fact File

Name: Lynn Lye Michael

Age: 27

Hometown: Petaling Jaya, Selangor

Education: Assunta Primary School, Assunta Secondary School, Petaling Jaya; Oklahoma State University (Bachelor of Science in Food & Biosystems Engineering), Culinary Institute of America, California (Professional Chef Certification I, II and III), United States

Occupation: Senior R&D project manager

Years abroad: 10

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