Taking risks pays off for ex-banker

Dou Hua Zhuang founder Chng Xueru tells ANNA LEE it’s always been her dream to set up a beancurd stall

WHEN you’re young, there’s nothing to lose. For 27-year-old Chng Xueru, founder of Dou Hua Zhuang, that was her mantra – even though she took a big pay cut when she quit her well-paying job as an offshore banking relationship manager to become a hawker selling bean curd.

But the gamble might have already started to pay off. In its first year, Dou Hua Zhuang produced a six-figure turnover and spawned its first franchise outlet.

Xueru believes soya bean is here to stay and Dou Hua Zhuang’s best-selling item is its cold bean curd, made from freshly ground beans that you can still smell in the post-lunch rush hour. The bean curd is kept cold in a giant fridge.

‘It is only when you put everything you have in, then will you do your best. If you get funding, you’ll not take it seriously.’

– Chng Xueru, Dou Hua Zhuang founder

Founded in February last year, Dou Hua Zhuang is located next to Xueru’s parents’ tze char stall. Her family has played a very important role in her life – and seems to continue to have an influence as she ventures into business.

This is reflected in the name she chose for her stall, “Dou Hua Zhuang” means soya bean village in Mandarin, but “Zhuang” is also Xueru’s family name.

“It was quite easy… maybe a five minute decision,” Xueru’s older sister, Xue’e, recalls on how the name came about. Xue’e was instrumental in the development of Xueru’s business.

Xueru is the youngest of three children. In her business, her mum has become her “harshest critic”, according to Xueru. Her father has the final say on whether her product can be sold.

“Starting my own business is in my DNA,” Xueru says. Besides her parents, many of her relatives are also in business.

Xueru has taken the switch from banker to hawker in her stride. “After a while, you will want to do something that truly belongs to you,” she says.

“It has always been my dream to set up a beancurd stall. I loved beancurd from young. When I saw that the stall next to my parent’s tze char stall was available for let, I immediately jumped at it,” she excitedly recounts. Xueru describes herself as a risk lover: “In business, if you don’t seize the opportunity now, then when?”

Elder sister Xue’e helped with the start-up and development of the business, while Xueru was serving out her notice period at the bank. Xueru did her research before coming into the business full-time after she left the bank.

“I am very proud of my sister,” says Xueru, acknowledging that the business could not have started without her older sister’s expertise.

Coming from an interior design background, Xue’e has been involved with the setting up of many other restaurants in Singapore and other parts of Asia. She was also key in developing Dou Hua Zhuang’s marketing material and designing its stall front.

Xueru believes that the marketing and product branding of her business is something over many of her competitors. They appear to pay little attention to these modern management concepts, which Xueru picked up when she studied entrepreneurship as part of her course at the Nanyang Technological University.

Jumping onto the social media marketing bandwagon, Xueru harnessed the powers of social media and the Internet to build up the brand name of the business. “I was never a Facebook user. I don’t like these types of things. But for the sake of the business, I created an account,” says Xueru.

“When people think of cold bean curd, I want them to immediately think of Dou Hua Zhuang,” she adds, believing that Dou Hua Zhuang will one day become a household name.

Currently, Xueru concentrates on solidifying Dou Hua Zhuang’s presence in western Singapore, since most of her competitors operate in the east.

Many others have approached Xueru for franchise rights, but she remains careful in giving out the rights. “I must make sure they have the same passion as me. I want them to be proud of Dou Hua Zhuang, to proudly say that this is my business and to want to establish the name of Dou Hua Zhuang,” she says. So far, Xueru has only one franchised outlet in Chinatown.

She continues to receive encouragement from good reviews that she sees online. “When I Google ‘cold bean curd’ for example, I see people’s praises, and I feel very shiok,” she says, her face lighting up with satisfaction.

Xueru admits that “age is finally catching up with her” and she is perhaps a little too old to say “I am young, there’s nothing to lose” anymore. Still, she continues to look for more opportunities to expand her brand name and looks towards setting up an outlet in Malaysia. Xueru is also planning to open a central kitchen where she can better cater to the demand from customers as well as franchisees. She believes in the importance of fully funding her own business.

“It is only when you put everything you have in, then will you do your best. If you get funding, you’ll not take it seriously.” That being said, she adds: “The satisfaction that you get here is more than what mere dollars and cents can quantify.”