A menu of dining options

Katrina Holdings’ recipe for growth is to serve up seven different dining concepts that target different segments of the market.

Looking to spread its wings: Although labour taxes have affected Katrina’s expansion plans in Singapore, Mr Geh is still confident about his company’s prospects as well as the future of the regional F&B industry.

Indian expatriates and tourists. According to Mr Geh, “this group prefers classic Mexican food rather than the younger, hipper ‘Tex-Mex’ style offerings.”

Mr Geh believes in going the extra mile to ensure an authentic dining experience, often delving into the culinary history and aesthetics of the various cultures behind the food in his restaurants. For example, Beijing-born Indonesian chef Toh ensures the authenticity of its cuisine and features duck dishes. In addition, the decor features inlays inspired by traditional Balinese shadow puppets.

Aide from his tourist- and Clarke Quay restaurant, Mr Geh has three other dining concepts: namely Ballich, Streets and Hangas, which offer themed concept-restaurant fare at mid-range prices.

Ballich, as the name suggests, offers Indonesian and Thai food. It was Katrina’s first restaurant chain. It was initially set up in March 1998 to take advantage of the dearth of casual dining restaurants there, especially ones with “Hibachi” certification. With the success of the first branch in West Mall, the Ballich chain today boasts seven restaurants in Singapore with another one opening at the end of the year in Katong.

Streets opened when the Hong Kong style concept was catching on here, but business really jumped when Mr Geh got his “Hibachi”-certified to accommodate the Malay-Muslim community, which traditionally has more limited options when it comes to Chinese cuisine. Hangas, whose signature dish is the Vietnamese “Criss Cross Vermicelli”, was created to cater to what Mr Geh saw was an untapped market of affluent immigrant Chinese office workers and students in the Bugis area. And when he was right, they make up three-quarters of Hangas’ customers. It recently extended its geographic base by opening a branch in Serangoon, a suburb near Serangoon, which has attracted more local patrons.

Katrina’s concept-dining strategy has paid off handsomely, and one might even be tempted to say that Mr Geh has a Midas touch, seemingly finding success in every dining concept he creates.

Still, the food and beverage business is not without its challenges. It is difficult to recruit