

Do me a flavour by Zieman



At least 90% of the food we consume uses permitted chemical formulas to recreate the flavours of passion fruit, strawberry, avocado, blueberry, tea and more. — Photos: AZMAN GHANI/TheStar

Matrix, the country's largest manufacturer of chemical flavours and fragrances, is setting its sights on becoming a global player. And why not? We have a very good track record of being able to produce what our customers want, its founder tells ZIEMAN.

Almost everything we eat and smell which has been processed beforehand uses flavouring. And there's a chance that local company, Matrix Flavours and Fragrances, had a hand in crafting it.

Matrix is the country's largest manufacturer and exporter of chemical flavourings and one of Malaysia's leading fragrance and flavour house.

The founder and Managing Director Dr Tan Chee Hong, a chemist, took more than 35 years to build up the company. And today, his daughter, Dr Tina Tan, is the General Manager and in charge of manufacturing and product development.

Tina has a doctorate in synthetic and organic chemistry from the University of Melbourne.

"The world of flavour-making has a hand in almost everything we eat, from bottled drinks and sauces to spreads and sweets. At least 90% of the food we consume uses permitted chemical formulas to recreate the flavours of passion fruit, strawberry, avocado, blueberry, tea and hundreds of other flavours and fragrances," she explains.

"The tastes are almost like the real thing. Matrix Flavours and Fragrances formulate using ingredients found to be naturally occurring in foods, according to the FEMA GRAS list- extracts, oils and aromachemicals that are regarded as safe for human consumption to replicate tastes in nature. We are always developing new products for our customers," adds Tina who joined in 2009.

Matrix's flavours are accepted in 55 countries across six continents because it possesses kosher and *halal* certifications. It also works with local and international agents and distributors, as well as partners in Myanmar and India, where it manufactures flavours and perfumes.



Father and daughter back then... (top) And the way they are today.

With nearly 40 years of experience behind it, Matrix wants to become a global force in the food ingredients sector. To increase production capacity, it recently invested US\$12mil on expanding and upgrading its facility in Malaysia.

The halal business is good business for the company. It undertakes contract manufacturing in Japan, South Korea, Indonesia and the Philippines to help manufacturers meet the increasing demand for halal flavours in Asia.

"It's difficult to estimate the actual size of the halal food market. A report from the World Halal Hub report estimates that it could be closer to US\$2.3tril. However, the degree of complexity required for food processing has resulted in the emergence recently of a number of regulatory and certification bodies in response to market needs, particularly the South East-Asian models of halal," says Tina.

According to her, there has been much debate about a global, harmonised system for halal products. But this is not an easy task to accomplish, taking into account the different religious and cultural practices and national trade interests.

"It is an even bigger challenge for food manufacturers that export their products to identify the most appropriate certification bodies. Food manufacturers

cannot ignore the lucrative market of a population of 1.6 billion people,” Tina points out.



Matrix creates not only natural flavours but also such new gastronomic delights as passion fruit crush, milk Hokkaido cakes and ice lemon tea.

Matrix Flavours & Fragrances Sdn Bhd, incorporated in 1978, is the first locally-owned South-East Asian flavour house.

The company offers tailor-made solutions for customers. After selecting the flavours, their application labs will assist customers to develop the final product to help make the food stand out.

Matrix customers include multinationals, regional manufacturers and SMEs. Local customers include manufacturers of bakery goods, ice-cream, beverages, dairy products and instant noodles, not to mention pharmaceutical and latex-based industries.

“Our solutions are backed by strong research and development, which takes place at our factory in Telok Panglima Garang, Banting. Our food safety standards meet FSSC 2200 standards, and all our products undergo rigorous quality checks before leaving our warehouse,” says Tina.

She adds that the company’s strength lies in its ability to create heat-resistant flavours for niche segments like baking, beverage and pharmaceuticals.

For Tina, Matrix has been a part of her life since the day she was born. That is why after spending some time working in the academic world.

Tina’s father, Dr Tan, started out as a biochemist specialising in extracting tocotrienols and other antioxidants from the rubber tree. He also worked on the synthesis of flavanoids from tropical plants. Tan joined the Kuala Lumpur Kepong plantation group in 1974 as head of manufacturing and marketing.

Two years later, when the plan to go into refining halted, Tan formed Matrix Sdn Bhd with a start-up capital of RM10,000 to sell palm oil refinery equipment. His company quickly became the biggest player and was selling to all the major refineries in Malaysia and Indonesia.

However, as the business plateau-ed, Tan turned his attention to manufacturing flavours.

“Flavours comprise natural ingredients, essential oils, natural extracts and aromachemicals and are used by manufacturers of food products such as ice-cream, seasonings and drinks to impart their flavour of choice. But when used in the manufacture of cosmetics and detergents, they are known as “fragrances”. The manufacturer tells us what flavour they want, and we create it in our laboratory and then manufacture it for them,” explains Tan.

“This becomes our intellectual property,” adds Tan who started the flavours business in 1979.

This new business proved promising, and Matrix slowly extended its product range and got into manufacturing oleo chemicals.

It was only in 2013 that it added fragrances into its product range. Now the company is looking at becoming a global player.

Tan is confident that they can give any flavouring house in the West a run for its money.

“We have a very good track record of being able to produce what our customers want,” he states.

Currently, they are selling to overseas customers through agents. But father and daughter feel that to be a true global player, they must be able to deal with customers directly.

The company has already set the wheels for this into motion.

In India, Matrix has teamed up with a partner in Kerala. It wants to have a manufacturing set-up in China too, where it has been selling for more than 20 years.

“The industry is constantly refining its processes. Our biggest challenge has always been creating indulgent flavours for a health-conscious market. But right now, we are selling concept ideas like our gastronomical delights like passion fruit crush, milk Hokkaido cakes and ice lemon tea,” says Tina.

“We are not only creating natural food flavours but we sell concepts too,” she adds.