

➔ **GOING** organic and vegetarian is said to be a healthier alternative to the chemical-filled world we live in, and that has never

been more true, considering the hustle and bustle of city life for most Malaysians.

One of the earliest advocates of this lifestyle is FMC Greenland Sdn Bhd, initiated by Dr Lee KB who, during his career as a surgeon, realised that some diseases could be prevented just by eating right.



by CALYN YAP



photos by DD HOE

He championed the cause by suggesting in 1996 that his family adopt the organic vegetarian lifestyle and, after eight months, seeing significant health improvements for the family, Dr Lee and his two brothers decided to venture into the business.

It was in 1997 that the Lee brothers started a small organic shop on the second floor in Subang Jaya, Selangor, teaching people how to grow wheatgrass and alfalfa sprouts.

In 2002, the youngest brother Terry joined the business, with the main responsibility of automating and systemising the company's operations, which took five years.

Following that initiative, the company expanded aggressively and now FMC Greenland has 34 outlets under its retail brand BMS Organics and nine outlets for its restaurant chain Be Lohas.

Executive director Terry Lee explains the reason behind the name of the company's brand and restaurant chain: "BMS stands for the health of the body, mind and soul, and Be Lohas represents a lifestyle of health and sustainability, which is what we try to promote.

"It's very in line with our personal beliefs and practices."

**Practising what you preach**

The founders are firm believers in the organic vegetarian lifestyle and strong advocates of practising what they preach, which translates into both their business and their private lives.

This has seeped into the company culture as well, and has become a competitive edge. What sets the company apart is perhaps that it manages its own supply chain, which includes farming, manufacturing, distributing to pharmacies and hypermarkets, retailing and, finally, exporting.

This way, FMC Greenland can ensure that it remains organic, from the raw ingredients to the final products. What makes it unique is that following a series of controls including from nutritionists, lab tests and a panel of doctors, at least two of the brothers will test new products before they go on the shelves. This makes sense because the company's principle, after all, is for more people to benefit from organic vegetarian products by providing the best quality at reasonable prices.



# Returning to nature

The Lee brothers advocate the organic lifestyle which is eating right while taking care of the environment

The Be Lohas restaurants represent a lifestyle of health and sustainability, which is what FMC Greenland tries to promote

Its retail outlets sell 1,000 stock-keeping units (SKUs), a combination of products by FMC Greenland – which has its own farm and five other farms contracted to supply fresh vegetables and the like, as well as a plant to manufacture its own products – and imported organic goods mostly from the US and Japan.

The reason for export is simple, as Terry says: "Malaysia is a relatively small market but it is only with volume that we can lower the prices, which is why we export overseas to more than 10 countries including Singapore, Brunei and Hong Kong. If we export more, we can leverage the costs."

The restaurant has a menu that will satisfy the healthiest of palates and even has soy cheese made of organic soya milk – currently the only one in Malaysia.

**Passionate about education**

When they first started, no one knew much about organics, which is why the staff had to spend at least two hours with each customer to educate them about the organic diet, its benefits and how to become healthier, Terry says.

There is much pressure doing business, he admits, but it is something that the brothers are happy to do



The company manufactures its own organic goods as well as imports them

because they know that it can help the people and the environment. However, even now there remains much educating to be done. While more people know about the organic lifestyle these days, it is often at surface level.

"Frontliners (those who wait on customers) are very important, so I give them a lot of training to ensure that they have the right mindset," Terry

“Even when doing business, people must do their part to conserve the environment.”

- TERRY



ry says, adding that the staff has to sit for a test to grade his/her knowledge on health and environmental issues, as well as on new and existing products.

All staff are trained for six to 12 months to be professional and caring when taking care of customers, and the test ensures continuous improvement in terms of service and knowledge.

Terry says: "We teach staff to make recommendations to customers, and to think of how to help them regain their health, not what we're going to sell them.

"We place importance in treating customers sincerely, and they're not doing their jobs right if they don't advise customers on things that are healthy for them to eat."

The organic vegetarian lifestyle is equivalent to caring for Mother Earth, he says, adding that it is perhaps this way of thinking that has led to the company's success and the reason that the staff enjoys its work.

The company also regularly publishes booklets and newsletters for customers in English and Chinese, to do its part in educating the public about the organic vegetarian lifestyle and conserving the environment.

Even the shunned habit of people bringing containers with them to restaurants is seen as something positive, as taking back excess food in such containers reduces waste in the form of styrofoam boxes and wasted food.

"People shouldn't feel shy doing this; in fact, I respect them for it since they're caring for our Earth. The same goes for reusable bags. We also don't provide tissue paper on our premises, since it's detrimental to the environment," he adds, pulling out a handkerchief to highlight his point.

**A bright future ahead**

Currently, Terry is working on opening more two-in-one concept outlets, which combine retail and restaurant functions. At the end of this year, he plans to have 11 such outlets.

While there have been over 40 enquiries about franchising, he says there are no plans to expand into franchising until the company is more prepared and the market more mature. This will perhaps be three years from now, after FMC Greenland opens 50 outlets by end-2014.

"We want the market to be more stable before we introduce the franchise [model].

"Also, we want our staff to be the first to franchise before we open it to outsiders," he says.

Making money from franchisees is easy but what is important is that the person running the business must have a passion for it.

This is because as a gradually-growing market, it still involves much education, he explains.

For the time being, it is about controlling the good quality of the company's 1,000 SKUs, which he admits is difficult.

At the end of the day, Terry says it is about leaving a good environment to his two daughters and maintaining their health.

He concludes: "We must really do our part to take care of the environment, even when doing business. It's all about doing something good that can benefit more people." **FOCUSM**