

24 SEP 2002

Malaysia-Restaurant/BM

MALAYSIAN RUNS RM27 MIL RESTAURANT IN SHANGHAI

By: Sha'rin Sahad

SHANGHAI, Sept 24 (Bernama) -- Ripples of haute cuisine are ringing loud in the very heart of bustling Shanghai, created by an adventurous Malaysian at his swanky restaurant.

Fancy a mediterranean meal while you are in one of the world's biggest industrial capital? Some Californian smooth red to tantalise the tastebuds, perhaps, while tunes of the traditional erhu are played live?

These gastronomic delights, and more, are to be found at Luna Cafe Bar, Shanghai.

Equipped with a rare 'can do' confidence, an entrepreneur from small-town Alor Setar swung open the doors to his restaurant Luna Cafe Bar in Shanghai in December 2000.

With a 60 million Renmimbi (RM27.6 million) investment, Heng Yeow Kuang, 48, took the plunge into the unknown only to come out beaming with pride.

"People said I was crazy to bust so many millions on a restaurant," Heng said. Unfazed by the doomsayers, Heng persevered and his business today rakes in RMB1.5 million (1 RMB=RM0.46) a month.

"I have covered my cost," he said swelling with satisfaction.

But why Luna for the restaurant's name? Heng said the Chinese people found it easy to pronounce. Moreover, Luna is the name of a "lucky" month for the business.

"Xiantiandi, where the restaurant is located, is like Bintang Walk in Kuala Lumpur. It's a central location," he said.

And the block of buildings near where the restaurant is housed has many historical sites one of which was once the Chinese Communist Party delegates office. This was where the party held its first meeting in March 1961, Heng said.

Open from 11am to 2am the restaurant is run, albeit ironically, by a French general manager and an Australian chef.

The people of Shanghai make up 90 per cent of the restaurant's patrons. They are quite exposed to western cuisine and welcome places opened by foreigners. The rest are Malaysians living there, Heng said.

But competition is stiff, hence Heng engages the services of musicians said to be among the very finest in Shanghai.

"Although the investment is high, so are the returns.

"We've started a Malaysian Club, 500-strong, with many activities going on. It helps strengthen ties among people," he said.

Heng has lived alone in Shanghai for nine years now. He started out with an air-conditioner repair business.

Heng's home, where he returns to every three months to visit his family and children, is Alor Setar.

When Chief Minister Datuk Seri Mohamed Ali Rustam visited the Luna Cafe Bar, he invited Heng to open a similar restaurant in Melaka to add to the food choices in the state.

Heng, in jest, invited Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad to his restaurant if he visits Shanghai.

The prime minister had been Heng's family doctor when he opened his clinic in Alor Setar next to Heng's grandfather's shop.

-- BERNAMA

SBS PC JK