



AN ENTERPRISING LADY

Founder of La Juiceria and Super Saigon on what drives her

By NASA MARIA ENTABAN

For years, Anabelle Co-Martinent revelled in the challenges of corporate life – the excitement of deadlines, presentations, reports and the lifestyle itself kept her determined to climb the ladder of success all the way to the top.

Thriving in her roles in product management and marketing for several companies in three countries over 12 years – the Philippines, Singapore and Malaysia – Co-Martinent was in a good place, career-wise.

But when she had her children, something changed.

"I had this nagging feeling," said Co-Martinent as she sipped on chai in a cosy corner of La Juiceria Superfoods Signature in Nadi Bangsar. "I always like to give talks to women, when women have children suddenly the whole outlook of life just changes completely, that made me realise that time is short, you have to plan your life, you have someone relying on you, and what's my purpose, what's the end goal?"

"I started to question if I wanted to continue in the corporate world, if you climb the ladder all the way up and you look at the ceiling and ask yourself, if I don't want to be the MD, why am I here?"

This realisation prompted her, in her mid-30s, to quit a comfortable, high-paying job, telling herself that if she didn't eventually discover her greater purpose in life, she could always go back to doing what she was good at.

Thus began a two-year journey of finding her purpose, while taking care of her small children, which she describes as being sometimes a lonely and humbling experience.

"I had to really take a step back and I suddenly became Anabelle with no title, Anabelle the homemaker – I have total respect for women who step back to sacrifice what could have been to spend time with their families," said Co-Martinent, who is married to a French ex-patriate working in Kuala Lumpur.

To keep her mind sharp, she worked as a radio producer, a soft skills trainer and other odd jobs, constantly researching business ideas before she landed on a winner – La Juiceria.

At the time, in 2013, cold-pressed juices were making waves all over the world, and she realised there was a gap in the market in Malaysia.

Heavily pregnant with her second child, Co-Martinent began juicing in her condo, trying out numerous formulations, and looking for the perfect business partners. Two friends from Sitiawan, Perak, Kong Len Win and Hong Theng Lok, who regularly delivered her vegetables, ended up becoming the perfect partners. (Several months into operations, Berjaya Group's Chryseis Tan came on board as a partner and shareholder)

She had her doubts initially, wondering if people would buy a bottle of juice for RM16.

"Will people buy juice for that price? We realised that there will be people that need vegetables but they don't want to eat them," she said.

For eight months, they sold their juices

online, before realising they needed physical stores.

La Juiceria now has six juice bars and more than 15 stockists in the Klang Valley and one in Penang, as well as five cafes called La Juiceria Superfoods.

"The growth is because it's a cash business. You sell a product, people pay you cash, we kept pumping the money back into the company," explained Co-Martinent. "Having the mindset about growing a brand versus keeping profits is what kept us alive, there were two or three brands that have closed that started same time as we did. If a brand doesn't evolve it dies off. The first year is exciting, the second year is all about sustaining, and the third year you get tired, your employees get tired because there's no growth, we had to constantly move forward."

"First, you need to be able to articulate your dream, and you hope that you meet people that are aligned to your dreams, and you reward them accordingly as you grow," said Co-Martinent. "I have employees with me since the day we began! As a startup you have to give them something you can't get in other companies – freedom, flexibilities, and when business is good you spread it around, when it's bad they understand that you can't be giving the same perks."

On the heels of La Juiceria's success, her next venture proved no less adventurous. Super Saigon, a Vietnamese food chain in Taman Tun Dr Ismail and Desa Sri Hartamas (with more to come), Co-Martinent says, was a way of making her partners' dreams come true.

"These two boys from Sitiawan made my dream of creating a healthy brand come true. They worked hard in Melbourne while studying there, cooking in kitchens for other people, and it was my time to make their dreams come true."

"We wanted to bring something back from Melbourne, they wanted to do something that is comfort food for Malaysians – soup and noodles."

The halal Vietnamese food chain with an attractive price point is a beautiful place to dine in – decorated in blue and white hues and potted plants, the interior of the brightly-lit space was inspired by Greece's Mykonos and Santorini islands.

The incredibly Instagrammable restaurants are part of the reason for Super Saigon's popularity, according to Co-Martinent.

"We believe that in today's F&B scene, food alone will not cut it, you can have the best food but if the environment isn't good, they will return but won't really talk about it.

"If you did something in between – beautiful, affordable and comfortable – a place where you can celebrate or eat alone, these are the elements of success," she added.

Their research took them to Melbourne and Vietnam, before they sat down to piece together a menu that was more Malaysian.

"On the first seven days of our opening in TTDI, me and my partners were there, waiting tables and in the kitchen," said Co-Martinent. "I saw people eat there for seven days straight. This is how you know that business is good, people came back many times in that first month and we knew we had something of a formula."



PHOTOS BY ART CHEN

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– Anabelle Co-Martinent

With businesses to juggle and her family to attend to, Co-Martinent makes sure she has time for herself to exercise.

"I don't have a lot of time, but you make time. I believe that you can have everything in the world but if you're not healthy it's nothing – you can't play with your kids, you can't be there for your husband."

She finds relaxation in nature, something she believes money can't buy – her favourite picks are the beach or the jungle.

"Nature can't be recreated, being in the middle of it really brings peace, perspective and that's what life is really about."

And having grown up in the Philippines surrounded by beautiful beaches, the sand and surf are her go-to as well.

Instead of lamenting about or agonising over whether pursuing her dreams takes up time away from her family, Co-Martinent

involves her children in her daily life.

They come with her to the office, and she also brings them to the factory, just like her mother did with her when she was a child.

"She owned a food processing factory and we would go there during summer vacations to help out," she recalled, then thoughtfully added, "Growing up with an entrepreneur mum, I always wanted to do the opposite, I wanted to be in the corporate world. After 12 years in that industry, I ended up becoming an entrepreneur."

"It's so empowering in a way, to teach my kids just as my mum taught me that the world can be anything you want, if you work for people you're always answering to somebody. People answer to me.

"It's an unbelievable feeling, and it's a very scary feeling knowing that whatever wrong decision you make, there's nobody

else to blame," quipped Co-Martinent, who also just started a boutique social media and marketing consultancy called Social Status.

Then there's the question mothers get asked all the time – can we have it all? "The 'all' is subjective, when I'm here I'm sacrificing my time away from my kids, so having a career and kids at the same time, it's not really 'all'. But it's whether you prioritise in life and you plan accordingly.

"Women who are busy tend to be more effective in prioritising. Women are great at multitasking, when you're a mother you're even better! Your instincts are already built in to have time with the children, the husband, the business."

"Every day is different, it can go from colourful to mind shattering, and that makes it really exciting."