

## 10 talking about



With many deliveries to meet every day, there is always work to be done at the Euro-atlantic office. — Photos: SaM THaM/TheStar



Korean strawberries are one of the company's bestsellers.



In case you were wondering, these are horn melons. They are said to taste tart and have the texture of cucumber.

# Just nuts about fruits

Ebby Loo, managing director of fresh food importer Euro-Atlantic, says her aim is to deliver food that is fresh and of undoubted quality. Always. **MEK ZHIN** reports on how she goes about achieving this.

AFTER almost a quarter of a century in business and still growing, food importer Euro-Atlantic has quietly proven to its naysayers that sticking to your guns is the road to a bountiful harvest.

The Ampang-based company, which has a fleet of 40 refrigerated trucks, specialises in importing and distributing fresh produce and, more belatedly, seafood, via its subsidiary C-Food Portion in 2007.

"Back when we started this business (in 1992), we noticed that apart from the usual tropical fruits and vegetables, the market lacked variety," says managing director Ebby Loo, who was a banker in a previous professional life.

"One of our partners was already running a specialty, produce-importing business in Singapore, so we took a leaf from his book and started Euro-Atlantic," she says.

Among the produce they import today are Korean strawberries, raspberries, avocados, red currants, rock chives, artichokes, mushrooms, salmon, Alaskan king crab and caviar. Along the way, they have also helped to change the way fresh produce is delivered.

According to Loo, who professes a love for fruits, veggies and seafood, it was the norm back then that fruits and vegetables were delivered using canvas-covered trucks. (You can still see one or two of these relics on the road.)

"We knew we wanted top-notch quality from the get-go, and the key to that was ensuring the produce stayed cool all the time. So one of the very first investments we made

was in refrigerated trucks — to the derision of some in the industry. They thought we were just out to create a fancy image for ourselves," Loo recalls.

Euro-Atlantic has remained true to its commitment of creating the best possible cold-chain management system. In 2009, they received the MS1480:2007 certification in food safety in line with HACCP (Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Points) standards. The certification covers all aspects of their product handling.

Loo says Euro-Atlantic has become synonymous with quality due to the high standards they hold to. In the company's early days when they only had a staff of 10, Loo often pounded the streets herself to look for customers.

"But after five years, our volume grew big enough that we could do our own importing. We have continued to grow since then," she says, adding that they now have over 200 employees.

Euro-Atlantic brings in food from 23 countries. Its top import is seafood from Norway at 23% of the total, followed by fruits and veggies. Volume-wise, vegetables trump fruits but in terms of value, fruits edge ahead. Everything is packed at their headquarters in Hulu Klang, with additional storage spaces located elsewhere.

"Our 10-tonne trucks will make deliveries about two to three times a week to our subsidiaries in Penang and Johor, while produce for Sabah are air-flown," adds Loo.

She says their seasonal items are available



Loo holding up a box of eye-catching red currants in one of the smaller rooms used to store their more unusual vegetables.

all year round as they get their supplies from various countries.

"We prefer to work directly with the growers and exporters, especially those who are already familiar with exporting products. Our relationships with our suppliers are very open. We go see them, and they in turn come here to visit us. It's quite a personal relationship we build with them," says Loo.

She speaks highly of her team whose task is to conduct market research and give them an idea on the readiness of the market for a particular product.

"Even when all the conditions are good, we find that customers still have many questions to ask when a new product is introduced, so we always work with our retailers to conduct promotions. Certain retailers are more open to introducing new products, while others not so much. Sometimes, it depends on the consumer spending power," Loo explains, adding that product sampling has also proven to be a sure-fire sales booster.

One of their most successful imports is Korean strawberries. In the last five-month season alone they brought in some 250 tonnes just to keep up with the demand.

Loo thinks education in product handling is an important aspect of their business.

"Product knowledge is very important in maintaining the quality of fresh produce. Some items should not be placed with others because it will have effects like quicker ripening. Then, there is the fact that to maintain product freshness, the temperature should

remain the same all the time.

"On our part, we have clear-cut SOPs to deal with it, but once we deliver it to our customers who are either supermarkets, hypermarkets or those from the hotel, restaurant or catering business, they may sometimes not be able to keep to this standard," Loo explains.

She says her staff have no problem maintaining the requisite standards because she makes sure to keep them motivated and happy. For every five years a worker remains with the company, he or she receives a token of appreciation. This ranges from cash for the first five years to an investment plan for those who stay on for 20 years.

"We also have annual company trips and dinners because I believe that our people are our best asset, and everyone deserves a little something back when the company is doing well," Loo stresses.

Looking forward, Loo says they have started making plans to move to larger premises.

"We are also eyeing the possibility of buying into or merging with other companies with synergy for a possible listing, either on the Kuala Lumpur or Singapore stock exchange. This is in our five-year plan," she reveals.

Loo says she wakes up every day excited to start work.

"I'm still very passionate about this business, and I find myself often waking up with ideas and looking forward to the day. We hope one day to become the leading specialty food importer in Malaysia," she enthuses.