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euro-atlantic group

JUNE 2018 — ISSUE 171

asiafruitmagazine.com



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Breaking the glass ceiling

KUALA LUMPUR—Ebby Loo, Malaysian entrepreneur and Euro-Atlantic group managing director, says a sense of humour and strong team spirit are crucial for women to get ahead in a man's world.

by Luisa Cheshire



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 ABOVE—Ebby Loo, co-founder and managing director of Euro-Atlantic
 OPPOSITE TOP—Ebby Loo and some of her 250-strong staff
 OPPOSITE BELOW—Korean strawberries are one of the firm's top fruit imports

Unfortunately – like most businesses around the globe – fresh produce is very much a male domain, Ebby Loo says matter-of-factly. Attracting female leaders is particularly difficult in Asian societies where women, more often than not, are regarded as mother-figures who stay home to look after the children. “This discriminatory mindset is changing as women in Asia receive better education and more join the workforce,” the Malaysian entrepreneur and managing director adds, speaking from company headquarters in Kuala Lumpur. “But changes are slow in comparison to their counterparts in Western developed nations.”

Ebby Loo is a woman. She also heads up a multi-million-dollar Malaysian fresh produce import group, Euro-Atlantic, which she co-founded back in 1992 when the second of her now four children was just one-year-old.

A former banker turned entrepreneur, Loo is an exception to the norm in Malaysia. A female business pioneer; a “rare rose among thorns”, she jokes. Loo is a woman in a man's

world, who shattered the glass ceiling 26 years ago with sheer determination and an indefatigable work ethic.

"Women coming into the fresh produce business have to have enormous patience, work hard and stay strong when faced with adversity. Never give up," says Loo, who in the early days of Euro-Atlantic regularly pounded the streets of Kuala Lumpur looking for produce customers.

"For a woman to be in a leadership position and be successful in this male dominated industry, she must possess several important qualities," she adds. "A strong spirit of teamwork; great PR and communication skills; the ability to work harder than her male counterparts for recognition; and a great sense of humour."

At 57, and showing no signs of slowing down ("age is just a number!" she quips), Loo is tremendously proud of what Euro-Atlantic has become. It has grown from a company of eight people, to an import group of five firms spanning Malaysia with 250 employees. In 2017, it achieved sales revenue of close to US\$50m, and its brand, First Pick, (launched eight years ago) is fast becoming a household name (it won Malaysia's 'best consumer fresh produce brand' in 2014).

The first firm ever to import Australian avocados, Korean strawberries and Korean yellow melon (Chamoe), among many other prod-



ucts, into Malaysia, Euro-Atlantic recently launched a new range of dried fruits and nuts under its First Pick marque, and is now looking to expand its grocery lines. "Euro-Atlantic began as a pioneer bringing new produce to Malaysia, and that's what we continue to do to this day," says Loo, revealing that it all began over a question of cheese.

"In the mid-1980s to early-90s I was working for a local banking group in Kuala Lumpur," she recalls. "In 1991, a family friend from Hong Kong came to the city to look for an import representative in Malaysia for a range of branded French cheese products he distributed. He visited us and offered my husband and me the agency role. We did our homework, and through

"Women coming into the fresh produce business have to have enormous patience, work hard and stay strong when faced with adversity"

our market research discovered that while demand for French cheeses was okay in Malaysia, demand for imported air-flown fresh fruit was very strong, particularly among Kuala Lumpur's five-star hotels, and there was virtually no local distributor carrying a good product range."

At this time, Malaysia was experiencing an economic boom with strong annual GDP growth of 7-8 per cent, Loo adds. "Several international hotel chains were reported to be putting up new hotels in Kuala Lumpur and its environs. This positive market environment gave us the confidence to set up a fresh produce import firm," she explains. "To ensure the company got regular supplies, we invited a Singaporean fresh produce import contact to join as partner; and so Euro-Atlantic was born in 1992."

Loo says she was the obvious choice to head up the incipient operation, since their Singapore business partner, CH Tan, had his own company to run, and her husband, Eric Goh, was in real-estate. "I left the banking industry, and without any previous experience in fresh produce, embarked on the challenge of being a female entrepreneur. The rest, as they say, is history."

Tan, already five years in the produce game, showed Loo the ropes, sharing product knowledge and sourcing information. With regards to managing the business, Loo drew on her banking career experience. As for the day-to-day running of the firm, "mostly it was a case of trial and error", she laughs, her self-deprecating humour belying her sharp focus and clear vision that set Euro-Atlantic on its course to success from the outset. »



THE BOARDROOM

One of the company's first investments was in refrigerated lorries, to the derision of some in the industry since canvas-covered trucks were the norm at the time. "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," says Loo.

Within four years of operating, Euro-Atlantic had expanded from one 1,800ft² commercial shop with chiller room, to three. By 2003, it launched its first subsidiary in Penang. A year later, it opened the purpose-built 40,000ft² warehouse facility in Ampang, on the outskirts of Kuala Lumpur, that it continues to occupy today.

"In the early years of the business, we imported via Singapore as we didn't have the volume to bring in by the container," says Loo. "But by the fourth or fifth year, the majority of our imports were direct from the country of origin to Kuala Lumpur."

To date, Euro-Atlantic's top five fruit imports comprise berries (strawberries, blueberries, raspberries and blackberries), avocados, persimmons, cherries and lemons, from the US, Spain, Australia, Argentina, South Africa, Chile, Korea, Turkey and Holland. And the group, which supplies Malaysia's catering retail, institutional and wholesale sectors, now has



branches in Kuala Lumpur, Penang, Johor Bahru (southern Malaysia), Kota Kinabalu and Kuching (East Malaysia).

"The heads of the five subsidiaries report to me and we hold monthly management meetings," says Loo, whose pride in her team is palpable. "Counting on my team of employees keeps me inspired," she says.

Euro-Atlantic staff, in turn, know they can count on her. Providing employees with education subsidies for their children is just one of the many things Loo's company does to foster a happy working environment. "I believe that our people are our best asset, and everyone deserves a little something back," she says.


'Giving back' to the wider Malaysian community is also important to Loo, who has set up a thrice-yearly surplus food distribution programme to national orphanages and refugee camps, which she and staff volunteers personally select and visit.

"Accepting hurdles and having confidence in the many aspects of my company to overcome them has led me to believe that optimism and faith can move mountains."

The 1997 Asian financial crisis was one such hurdle that put Loo and her staff to the test, just five years into trading. The firm's bottom line was hit hard by foreign-exchange losses, since its import transactions involved many different currencies.

ABOVE—Ebbly Loo says she is still passionate about produce

"We were able to overcome this difficult period with our very supportive bank, Citibank, which strongly believed in our management and the prospects for the [Malaysian] fresh produce import industry," Loo reveals. Twenty-one years on, business is booming and Loo has never looked back. "I have no regrets at all to have left the banking industry and embark on the fresh produce business," she says, smiling.

"The vibrancy of our business keeps me on my toes every day when I step into my office. I'm still very passionate about fresh produce, and I find myself often waking up with ideas and looking forward to the day." 

A promotional banner for Euro-Atlantic Group. The background is dark green with a collage of fresh fruits like strawberries, raspberries, blueberries, and citrus slices. The 'first pick' logo is centered, featuring a red cherry with a green stem and leaves. Below the logo, the text reads "first pick of the season for real satisfaction". At the bottom, the Euro-Atlantic Group logo is displayed with the tagline "Fresh Produce • Seafood • Gourmet est. 1992". To the right, contact information is provided: "info@euro-atlantic.com.my", "euro-atlantic.com.my", "facebook.com/euroatlantic", and "@eafirstpick".