

On the List

Founder of Unlisted Collection, Loh Lik Peng discusses the importance of F&B to his business, the hotel market at large and why ‘heart, mouth and instinct’ will always trump a market survey.

Words: Harry McKinley

Loh Lik Peng is a dynamic force in global hospitality. Surprising considering his education in law and former profession as a corporate litigator, of all things. Yet the shift in trajectory has paid dividends for the Singapore-based hotelier and restaurateur. His hospitality group, Unlisted Collection, encompasses properties in Sydney, London and Shanghai, as well as Singapore of course. It includes seven boutiques and, although they’re all starkly different from one another, they are united by a common theme: a commitment to world-class F&B.

It’s in one of these restaurants that we’re to meet Peng: the Typing Room at Town Hall Hotel in London’s Bethnal Green. We’re early, but no matter, it’s an opportunity to find the best seat and have a covert stroll past the open kitchen. The restaurant is overseen by Lee Westcott and it shows in the modern European menu. It’s a glossy, modern space that represents the continued gentrification of a neighbourhood that was once a little rough around the edges.

When Peng arrives it’s with little fanfare. He’s alone and greets the staff with warm familiarity. He doesn’t cut the figure of a traditional businessman. There’s no starched shirt or razor sharp suit, but instead a creased blazer and jeans. He’s a little breathless, power walking as he did from the

nearest tube station. “Have you eaten?” he asks in typical Singaporean style. It may be a traditional greeting for the region, but for a restaurateur it feels particularly fitting. At the very least we understand why he’d want to show off the wares of a venue that garners little but praise. He collapses into the seat opposite, immediately springing into conversation about his day. Anyone lunching nearby in the half-busy restaurant might think we’d met before; such is the informal ease with which Peng talks. “What do you think of the place?” Well, It’s marvellous of course.

Exploring Unlisted Collection’s various hotel locations, the importance laid on delivering terrific restaurants is clear. From Jason Atherton’s Kensington Street Social at The Old Claire Sydney to unpretentious French dining at Cocotte at the Wanderlust Singapore, there’s a focus on quality and variety.

“Groups tend to be good at either the hotel side or the F&B side. Very few do both. Even fewer do both well,” says Peng, with a chuckle. “We are equal parts hotel and F&B. Our hotel F&B venues tend to be successful in their own right. We’re fairly balanced in that respect and that’s a relatively unusual thing.”

Then again there’s something unusual about Unlisted Collection. This isn’t a group that deals in run-of-the-mill and each project embodies a different attitude and a thoroughly





Table No.1 at The Waterhouse at South Bund, Shanghai

different personality. Peng is insistent that this was the intention from the outset. “We never repeat,” he says.

It’s a smart approach from a group whose hotel work is centred on boutiques. It ensures every hotel and every restaurant remains the original and never the photocopy – each one with its own story to tell.

“It’s still a relatively niche market,” say Peng, on the issue of boutiques as Unlisted Collection’s ‘sweet spot’, “but it has grown dramatically. Ten years ago you had the Philippe Starck ones, now you have a lot of hotels operating in the 30 to 50 room range. People like Kit Kemp have changed the model dramatically. It’s definitely a different business model, but one that is much more viable today than before.”

Peng switches effortlessly between discussing hospitality in conceptual terms and the bottom line. Yet despite the scale of his business interests he’s a believer in intuition or what he calls, “a bit of heart, mouth and instinct.” He’s never conducted a market survey and readily admits that most of his projects are based upon the flash of an idea, the rest, as he says, “is filling in the gaps.”

“It’s tough because you never quite know what will work. I’m never super confident and that’s crucial because it keeps you on your toes,” he says. “Fear is important because it forces you to concentrate. You can control a lot of elements and have a sense that something is what the market wants, but until you try you never know.”

Though he’s keen to point out that it’s never plain sailing, it seems that Peng’s intuition has so far served him well. For for all of the importance placed upon F&B by hotels today, and certainly by his own company, he takes a surprising view of its place in the grand scheme. “If you look at London Edition with Berner’s Tavern, André Balazs with Chiltern Firehouse and groups like ourselves, then F&B is an important component. But that is a tiny sliver of the hotel market. I think to suggest that F&B is driving the market based on the success of those niche players would be an exaggeration,” he says. “Very large companies will build large hotels and they’ll have all day dining and banqueting. The majority of hotels are still built under that model. So the tiny sliver that does well is, I think, the exception at the moment, not the rule.”

So when it comes to these behemoth hotels and the large global players, what could they be doing to better capitalise on F&B as a revenue driver? “I think most of them are not agile enough to ever be meaningful players in the F&B scene, simply because the rooms component will always have to drive their business. The GM and the F&B director can never pay enough attention to it,” Peng says. “The hotel operators, by and large, do it terribly. So I think most of them are better leasing F&B spaces to outside operators to run independent restaurants that are part of the hotel, rather than do it themselves. The guest doesn’t care whether the restaurant or the bar is independent, they just care about their experience there. Claridge’s do it well. They have a very strong room component and they lease F&B out to the people who do it best. The experience for the guest is seamless.”

With Unlisted Collection, all of the F&B spaces are operated inhouse of course. The organisation’s mix of standalone units and hotels affords Peng something of a wide playing field to explore ideas, but he’s clear on the focus. For staying guests, “breakfast is fundamental”, room service,

“less so. Especially in a city where you have a wealth of choice and where great food is available at all times of the day,” he says. Anyway, guests don’t expect every bell and whistle when staying at a boutique asserts Peng. “I think the people who go to boutiques are different from those who are quite happy to go and stay in a big chain. They demand the same level of service that you would get in a larger hotel, sometimes even more, but for them it’s about the character of being in a smaller property with unique branding and a unique offering,” he says. “It overwrites the convenience that a large hotel might provide. A smaller hotel will not traditionally provide the same level of facilities, but I think in F&B terms, it’s not always expected or necessary. If someone orders room service all the time, for example, they’re missing a big chunk of what the city has to offer and I don’t think that speaks to the demographic of boutiques.”

Of his own hotels, Peng cites the Waterhouse at South Bund, Shanghai – part of Design Hotels – as a good example of what Unlisted Collection represents. “A 19-room hotel, really cutting edge,” he says. “You have to be very adventurous to stay there and part of that mix is a very successful restaurant.” Indeed the 60-cover Table No 1, with its ‘world-influenced’ modern European menu is often touted as one of the city’s best. It’s with restaurants such as these that the importance of non-staying guests becomes clear.

“If you have a hotel restaurant and you rely on staying guests, you’re in big trouble.”

“For all of the talk of breakfast and room service, ultimately 95% of your F&B business is from people outside,” Peng explains. “If you have a hotel restaurant and you rely on staying guests, you’re in big trouble. That brings its own challenges. London and Sydney, for example, are foodie capitals. You have to be on top of your game otherwise you’re not going to go anywhere. Setting aside the hotel, if the restaurant is not excellent from day one it will sink. These markets are relentless and you have to hit those right notes from the start.”

With the opening of The Old Claire in Sydney last year and the completion of Kensington Street Social in January – the third restaurant for the 62-room hotel – Peng’s attention has shifted from new projects to established. “We are planning refurbishments in the next two years, so we’re undergoing the planning for that now. 196 Bishopsgate is going into major refurbishment next year, so that’s a focus.” As for the future, Peng is circumspect. “If you had asked me five years ago, I would have gone anywhere. But given our geographical reach now, I have to be careful I don’t spread myself too thin. I want to continue having fun and if we went into a new market my life would be unbearable. Naturally I’d like to do more projects, but I think they’ll be in markets I’m in now. Unless I find a really good project,” he says, rounding things off with a breezy exception. After all, when the flash of an idea is all it takes, who can say? ●