



ST PHOTO: TED CHEN

# Office boy turns sushi chef

Mervin Goh tried various jobs before answering his calling to become a chef in a Japanese eatery



rebecca lynne tan

The story behind home-grown restaurant group The Akashi Group is, in some ways, a tale of brotherhood.

In 1995, a "raw as sashimi" Mervin Goh joined his older brothers Sam and Don to start a Japanese eatery in the basement of Tanglin Shopping Centre.

Brash and attention-seeking, the then 23-year-old knew nothing about Japanese cuisine and even less about what he was going to do with his future. But Sam felt a life in a Japanese kitchen might help his youngest sibling find his moorings.

Barely months into his job at the newly opened Akashi, the headstrong young man was ready to call it quits. Yelled at by co-workers, made to do grunt work such as chopping daikon (Japanese radish) and suffering cuts from his own clumsy knife work, he hated being a cook.

"I was so fed up, I threw the knife down and walked out in a huff. I told Sam I wasn't going to do this anymore and that I was going home," recalls Mr Mervin Goh, now 38.

His elder brother took him aside and talked to him. He asked Mr Goh if he wanted to "eat the sweet or the sour part first?"

"You're young and you have the energy. Why don't you take the sour part first?" Sam reasoned.

With that, the younger Mr Goh calmed down. Suddenly, everything made a lot of sense.

Looking back on the incident, he says: "It would have been easier to have walked away. If he had not made me a chef, I don't know what else I would have done."

In the years since, as chef and co-owner of a growing string of eateries, he has tasted the sour, bitter and spicy tang of

life, and is now starting to savour the sweet.

## Growing empire

These days, the chef-restaurateur is the co-director of a multi-million-dollar business. Running the Akashi Group with his three older siblings – brothers Sam, 49, and Don, 47; and sister Eleana, 48 – he is the company's de facto spokesman and possibly its friendly face.

Each sibling has a 25 per cent stake in the business, which is expected to have a turnover of at least \$50 million next year.

That one Akashi restaurant in Tanglin Shopping Centre has spawned a mini-empire, which will cover 20 eateries next year.

Two more Akashi Japanese Restaurants have opened in Paragon and VivoCity. The Tanglin outlet relocated in 2008 to Orchard Parade Hotel, a stone's throw away.

Other ventures include Japanese grill restaurant Akanoya Robotayaki in Orchard Parade Hotel; bistro White Dog Cafe in VivoCity; two shabu shabu outlets Akashabu in Kallang Leisure Park and Funan Centre; and five branches of Grandma's, which serves local favourites.

The "newest baby", Freshness Burger, opened its first outlet here at nex mall in Serangoon Central last month.

A second outlet of the Japanese made-to-order burger chain opened at Century Square in Tampines last Friday. A third will open at The Central in Eu Tong Sen Street next month.

Next year, the group will open another White Dog Cafe at nex, three more Freshness Burger joints and a second Akanoya Robotayaki at Marina Bay Sands.

Sitting in Grandma's at Paragon, Mr Goh is laidback in a slightly rumpled way, in a long-sleeve shirt left untucked into blue jeans. He seems to know all his waitstaff by name, and takes swigs from a bottle of water, saying that we can do away with glasses.

To say that he is like a big boss would

be inaccurate: He is more like a big brother, at home in his domain.

Married for 10 years to bank relationship manager-turned-housewife Tan Wee Lynn, 35, he has two sons – Christian, six, and Zachary, two.

The group's aggressive expansion over the last two years has left him little time for his family, he says.

His wife says he is "too lenient" a dad, making her look "like the bad guy": He always gives in to the kids, extends their playtime and lets them play games on his iPhone.

With a guilty-as-charged laugh, he replies: "I'm always at work and if I were to get angry with them, I might lose them completely. We play different roles – one of us has to look bad."

He drives a four-year-old Audi and goes on holiday with his extended family at least once a year, usually during Chinese New Year.

Destinations have included Hokkaido, Australia, Bali and Phuket.

Not bad for a boy who grew up in a one-bedroom HDB flat in Balam Road in Aljunied, and had his first taste of sushi after he enlisted for national service.

He did not think the sushi was "special or delicate" back then, and treated it like another rice or noodle dish.

His mother, Madam Mary Koh, used to run a canteen stall at Nan Chiau High School, and his late father Goh Nu Nu did not hold a stable job.

When he was eight years old, his parents divorced. His mum remarried in his teenage years, and he is close to his stepfather Tan Kim Leng, a retired sailor.

Though his family was poor, he says, he never felt deprived. Being the youngest, his siblings showered him with presents and protected him from the harshness of a broken home.

He says much of the group's present success can be attributed to the close relationship shared by the four siblings.

They have few disagreements and there is little rivalry among them. Differ-

ences are always settled by talking things over. Mr Goh says: "Our love for one another always prevails."

The family is so close, they live next door to one another, in three townhouses in the Bukit Timah area. His mother and stepfather live with his sister's family.

Mr Goh did not always have his eyes set on carving fish and shaping sushi.

"I thought about being a professional footballer or joining Singapore Airlines as a flight steward," says the avid Tottenham Hotspur fan, who represented the Singapore Cricket Club in the National Football League during his late teens.

As a boy in the 1980s, he would head to the National Stadium to catch football matches. The enterprising kid would get in for free by offering to help vendors sell drinks and curry puffs. But reality kicked in after he finished national service.

Graduating from Changkat Changi Secondary School with an O-level certificate, he was not sure what he wanted to do with his life. Books was never his forte, though he enjoyed going to school and joking around.

By then, Sam and Don had already spent a decade working in well-known Japanese restaurants of the day, such as Unkai at the former ANA hotel, Keyaki at Pan Pacific Singapore and the then popular now-defunct teppanyaki restaurant Kurooka in Liang Court.

Meanwhile, Mr Goh was still trying to figure out what he wanted to do.

His first job, at 21, was at brokerage house Phillip Securities in 1993, which involved menial tasks of clipping documents together and delivering them to nearby buildings, for \$6 an hour.

It was there that he met his future wife. Ms Tan was working part-time as an administrative assistant while waiting to enter the Nanyang Technological University of Singapore to study accountancy.

She says: "We found that we could communicate. He had only O levels but he was very sincere and down to earth."

After a year at the firm, he decided to answer an advertisement for Vitagen salesmen. But, to his horror, his new job entailed being a door-to-door salesman in HDB estates.

He says: "I was thrown into the job

and I was shocked. Door-to-door? So malu (Malay for shameful), leh."

He took two weeks to sell his first packet of Vitagen. "I would count myself lucky if customers slammed their door in my face – at least I get to see their faces. Others didn't even bother opening the door," he recalls with a chuckle.

The tenacious salesman carried a backpack with 30 packets of the health drink and knocked on an average of 200 doors a day. Although he earned less than \$1,500 a month, he says he was happy then.

More importantly, the job helped build up his confidence level. "If you can be a door-to-door salesman, you can probably do anything," he says.

He persevered for nine months in 1994 before starting Akashi with his siblings the following year.

Those months of knocking have unconsciously shaped the way he treats the group's 300 employees.

"It was an honest job that taught me not to look down on anyone. Everyone is trying to make a living. It doesn't matter what job you hold."

## From diners to friends

He is no longer a salesman but some of his effortless charm, likely from those days, has remained.

These days, you can find Mr Goh, dressed in white chef garb, comfortably stationed behind the sushi bar at Akashi at Orchard Parade Hotel.

He is usually busy making sushi and is often seen chatting with diners, many of whom have become his friends over the restaurant's 15-year history.

Mr David Ong, 47, is a regular customer who has been dining at Akashi since it opened in 1995.

Calling Akashi his "second home", the executive director of financial services company AIA eats there two or three times a week when he is not travelling. His kids, aged 13 and 18, refer to Mr Goh as "Uncle Mervin".

The two men have travelled to Japan together four times in the last four years. Says Mr Ong: "Akashi has a family feel to it. It is where you can be yourself."

The friendly, unpretentious restaurant chain boasts customers such as top businessmen and well-groomed bankers.

But things were not always rosy for the Gohs, especially when they first started out. The first Akashi was set up with a start-up capital of \$150,000 – a gift from their mother and stepfather.

A Japanese restaurant run by Singaporeans was quite the anomaly back when the Japanese dining scene was dominated by chefs parachuted in from Japan.

On the perception that Japanese food prepared by local chefs was not as authentic, Mr Goh says: "We could not argue that we were Japanese. People would come in and say, 'Hey, you are not Japanese', and we accepted that."

They channelled their energy into preparing quality food and offering fresh ingredients, and it paid off. But 15 years on, Mr Goh does not think he is enjoying the proverbial "sweet life", yet.

Sweetness, he says, will be when he retires and gets to spend more time with his mother, wife and kids.

Until then, the tart, vinegary world of sushi and the restaurant business awaits his attention.

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## the monday interview with Mervin Goh

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## my life so far

'The Tag Heuer watch I received for my birthday was like a Ferrari to me. I was really happy because the brand was very big at the time. It wasn't so much the watch itself, but receiving the gift made me realise how much my siblings loved me'

Mr Mervin Goh on receiving a \$1,000 watch for his 21st birthday from his brother, Don



Mr Mervin Goh, at two years (above), in his family's one-bedroom flat in Balam Road, and with older sister Eleana (right) in 1973. PHOTOS: COURTESY OF MERVIN GOH

'I never view other sushi bars as competitors. We are partners building a name for the cuisine'

On the stiff competition among Japanese restaurants these days



Mr Goh and his wife Tan Wee Lynn (above), and their children – Zachary, two, and Christian, six.

'I know myself. I'm not stupid but I never enjoyed studying'

On why he chose not to go back to school after national service



Mr Goh with older brother, Don (left), in London. The younger Mr Goh and his mum joined Don and his wife on their honeymoon.

'If you ask me about failing now, I am much more fearful. We have been our own bosses for so long, if I were to fail tomorrow, I don't think I could go back and start working for other people'

On how different he is now, compared to the no-fear spirit when Akashi opened in 1995