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COVERSTORY

It's a perfect combination, the father built it and the son revolutionised it. Today The Big Rajah is KLs most sought after caterer ensuring that every event is one to be remembered.

By Charlotte Robert

It was 10pm and the knocking on the door was getting incessant. Rather than getting irritated, John Joseph Xavier welcomed the anxious guest into his home and patiently sat with him listening while he listed what he needed. He assured the guest that he would do whatever was necessary to meet his request and bid the relieved guest good night. This was what was done in the early days and this was how it got done!

Much has changed with time since the 1980s to now. While John Senior believed in personally managing everything by himself and building his catering business that way, his son, John William Xavier, CEO of the Big Rajah Food Caterers Sdn Bhd, has a different way of doing things, and proving that it works just as well.

"My father built the business around him which was good but it also trapped him. HE was the brand. My dad used to go for the functions he was catering to and stay till the end getting home only after midnight.

"I decided that was not the way, I made the business about the brand of the company, not about the person. Today if I leave, the company will still continue. I only show up for official functions, otherwise I remain low key focusing on the business," explained John.

Wise words from the only son who never intended to take over the family business in the first place. Years spent watching his father build the business; John had other plans for his life, one that did not include food and beverage at all. But it would be impossible to speak about that without first looking at how The Big Rajah got started.

As his children were growing, John Senior, who was born in 1929, decided to make ends meet by helping out a friend in catering while still holding down his full time job in Filem Negara.

Having gained some experience in the catering business, he eventually with two other friends started a catering business calling it Little Caterers. Little Caterers grew quickly in popularity as John Senior worked hard building it to great heights.

Years of hard work and sweat later, John Senior decided the time was ripe to leave Little Caterers and build a family business. A devoted husband and father, together with his wife Rossari, his four children, nieces and nephews, the

family started a catering business called Big Caterers. After ten years of giving the business his all, John Senior chose to finally retire. He was after all, 70 years of age.

With this turn of events, John Senior's wife and children left Big Caterers as well and decided to start The Big Rajah in 1999 with the tag line "A Royal Banquet." It was, after all, a business built on the philosophy that everyone should be able to eat in royal style.

Sitting at the helm was John William Xavier. How did someone who never wanted a part of the catering business end up steering the ship?

After his A-levels, all John wanted to do was hotel management in Switzerland. His sister was already in England studying business administration and it was while he was waiting in line for her to return that he got involved in events management and real estate. Watching money coming in made John yearn to become a businessman. Suddenly the option to continue studying was not that attractive anymore.

"Real estate was my first calling but with real estate when the market was up things were good but when the market was bad we were really affected. At this point I dabbled in other pies but nothing really worked. Then I sat down and analysed all options and realised that the food industry was actually a good one," said John looking back.

With catering experience already tucked under his belt, having worked part time in both Little and Big Caterers, John recalls following his father around as he worked in the early catering days. He also remembers big pots of food arriving at the house while his mother did the cooking for the events. The family literally ate and drank catering.

When Big Caterers started, there was only one staff and that staff was John. He started at the bottom as a driver and remembers what a hard task master his father was.

"The hours were ridiculous and the pressure he put on me was tremendous. My dad always said I should get to the point where I should chase him and tell him how things should get done but that day never came because he was iconic and really good at what he did. He was a very hands-on person who was afraid of nothing," said the affable John.

Being who he was, it only made sense therefore that John Senior should be the honorary chairman of The Big Rajah. Because John was still working at events management when The Big Rajah started, it was John Senior who ran the company in the initial five months putting the systems in place following the blue prints of Little and Big Caterers.

When John took over the reins, he set about making changes to the company and the catering industry. "With my dad, everything was done manually, and it took up his life. I knew that I had to change the outlook. Although we both believe in the personal touch, the concept of one person running the show can be changed. You need to delegate and supervise.

"Nowadays everything is computerised. We are trying to revolutionise the industry and make it relevant. In doing this, I emulate hotels and the changing trends. It was us who introduced the dome concept and brought in uniforms so our waiters will look professional. We have trucks with The Big Rajah

brand emblazoned on it so there is uniformity. We started doing on-the-spot *tosai* and *ice-kacang*.

"I modernised the industry so if someone wanted pomp, fanfare and style, they could always come to us. We spent money on decorations which we bought in India. Our trays, warmers and cutlery are one-of-a-kind and purchased in India as well. As for the menu, The Big Rajah specialises in fine Malaysian cuisine encompassing Indian, Malay, Chinese and Western foods. As we revolutionised the industry others have followed which makes me very aware of the need to be constantly innovative and five steps ahead," said John adding that he is very much a thinker just like his mother.

Taking on a legacy was understandably not easy. Initially John was not sure if he could bring in the numbers that his father was able to. "The second generation is always judged harshly. The icon is always self-made. No matter how hard you try society does not give you much of a chance.

"People always said my dad did this and did that. When I started there was



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a lot of travelling. It took almost three years before we started actually making money. I did other jobs such as events management and home ownership campaigns to bring in money into this business once the initial capital was wiped out and since we did not want to depend on bank loans. The early period was indeed very tough."

Believing in working smart and delegating work to capable staff surrounding him, John is working hard in changing the marketing strategy of The Big Rajah. With the help of his business manager, Vivian Danker, they have created a website and made a niche for themselves. Together they have changed the cottage industry to become as professional as it gets.

Insistent on not taking on too many orders so the high quality of The Big Rajah is maintained, John maximises his functions to ten a day. There is a check and balance procedure in place and details and punctuality are factors that are carefully adhered to.

"We personalise the service and give customers what they want. We provide the canopies, chairs and tables for the functions we cater to. We can stage a setting for you; provide the décor and the food of course. Everything complements each other; we even manufacture ice cream for our catering.

"The Big Rajah has grown by word of mouth as people believe in our product. We in turn believe and live on repeat clients," remarked John adding that although his cooks are from India the recipes used for the business are actually from his mother.

With clients ranging from royalty to the prime minister, multinational companies and the everyday guy on the streets, John believes in being relational to everyone he meets including his staff.

"Constantly being innovative inspires me. God wakes me up with new ideas so I am never pressured on how to get new ideas for my company. You can run the same old same old but after a while you have to do something different.

"I intend to keep innovating and growing this company. Vivian, my niece, thinks like me. She does everything from the marketing, coordination, and trouble shooting. She is a replica of me and hopefully one day she will take over the company.

"As for me, I plan to keep innovating the company and making the functions affordable. Although my father, who I greatly admired has since passed away, I intend to keep giving our customers the best that I can just as he did for all those years."

with John William Xavier,

CEO of The Big Rajah

He works smart and leaves plenty of time to enjoy what he loves



By Charlotte Robert

PILLARS: IN BETWEEN THE WEDDINGS, THE GARDEN SOIREES AND THE HOUSE PARTIES, WHAT TOTALLY RELAXES YOU?

John Xavier: Football! I am a fanatic fan of the English Premier League and a strong supporter of Chelsea. I have even been invited to Stamford Bridge once, the homeground of the Chelsea Football Club. I was entertained by the Club, had a meal and went on to watch Chelsea beat Manchester United 3-0 to win the title for the second year straight. It was an awesome time for me.

As a huge football fan I watch every match that Chelsea plays in. I buy the mugs, t-shirts, DVDs with all their championships and several other merchandise of the Club.

Aside from football, a lot of my free time is also spent in church. I wor-



ship lead and being a board member of Grace Assembly Church keeps me very occupied. However no matter how much I give, I have realised that you can never outgive God.

Right now, my time is also spent on living healthy. I have lost 35 kilos and I plan on losing another 15 kilos so I can be more mobile. I visit the gym every day and read many health food blogs.



AS SOMEONE WHO IS TOTALLY INVOLVED IN THE FOOD BUSINESS, WHAT ARE YOUR TOP THREE RESTAURANTS?

Believe it or not, I actually like Chinese food for its flavour. As for Indian food, I only enjoy it when I am in North India.

My favourite restaurant when it comes to Chinese food is the Oriental Pavilion for its *dim sum*. For western food I like The Sage Restaurant and Wine Bar at the Gardens. As for Japanese cuisine, you can find me at Raku Zen.

ARE YOU A GADGET BUFF?

I like my iPad. I listen to music and play games on it. I am a gamer and a pro at Angry Bird. For business, I use my desktop; some people find it surprising

that I don't own a laptop. As for phone calls, my Nokia serves me well.

DO YOU FANCY YOURSELF AS A COLLECTOR OF ANYTHING?

I collect foreign currency from all over the world in coins particularly Australian and British currency.

I used to have a collection of Charles Jourdan watches when it was trendy but these days it is my wife who buys watches for me. This one on my wrist right now is a Skagen from Denmark.

I don't really collect paintings but there is a particular painting I love of Christ which calms me down. When you reverse the painting, it becomes a picture of an eagle feeding its young. It is so beautifully painted and speaks

to me about the protective and caring nature of Christ.

HOW OFTEN DO YOU PUT YOUR TRAVELLING SHOES ON?

Whenever I can. I used to travel a lot when I was single. Travelling alone is nice because I can spend time talking to God and I really value this alone time as I lead a hectic life. Now that I am married, I will travel with my wife.

I love Italy; I fell in love with it the first time I went there. I like their food and culture. I want to go again because it is beautiful and the Italians are very nice people.

I have never been to the United States, but I do intend to go. I never really travel for business except to North India to do research and development. When I go there I visit all the top restaurants and hotels to check out the cuisine. In India you can live as a vegetarian because the food there is delicious.

WHO ARE YOUR FAVOURITE MALAYSIAN PERSONALITIES?

My pastor has been an inspiration to me for the past 30 years. I suppose what I really admire about him is his caring nature and how he shares his life. If you know the man personally you would know how much he cares for the down trodden and he really is a go getter for stuff like that.

WHAT BOOKS ARE ON YOUR NIGHTSTAND NOW?

The 9 to 5 Window, How Faith Can Transform The Workplace by OS Hillman. I also like the book by Joyce Meyer, *Knowing God Intimately* and *Are You Ready* by Bob Harper.

I like Bob Harper because as the trainer on *Biggest Loser*, he is very good at what he does and a very positive person. He writes about having the inner strength to lose weight and he takes you through weight loss step by step.

Knowing God Intimately is a fantastic book that teaches you how to know the Lord better.

As for *The 9 to 5 Window*, I had the chance to meet and listen to OS Hillman at a seminar and he talks about how to get your business going. This elderly man is such an inspiration. He is also very funny and there are lots

of testimonies in the book by other businessmen.

WHAT ROLE DOES MUSIC PLAY IN YOUR LIFE?

I like Andrea Bocelli, he attracts good singers. I was supposed to go for his Tuscany concert but unfortunately could not.

I also love Seal, I think his music is very good.

But what I spend a lot of time listening to now is Christian music when I am driving. I listen to Michael W Smith because his music is very inspirational and it has fantastic music score.

LET'S TALK ABOUT WHEELS

I like the Mercedes-Benz, the one I have now is the S320. However now I want to buy the E250 because I like the size of that car better. I like the Mercedes-Benz because it is a strong car and has very good safety features, at the same time, it is also an economical car. There is another car I like, the Porsche, but me being a big guy, that beautiful car would not work for me.

