

F&B sector gets its teeth into high tech

From robot waiters to 3D food printing, industry gears up for change



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Phyllis Ho

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FANCY having your restaurant meal delivered by a robot?

A dazzling menu of "disruptive technologies" that could represent the future of the highly-competitive food and beverage (F&B) sector went on display yesterday.

The Disrupt@The Bay event at the Promontory @ Marina Bay, organised by **DBS** Bank, comes as F&B operators are burdened by a crowded market, high overheads and labour shortages.

Live demonstrations of gadgets ranging from robotic servers to 3D food printing were available - all aiming to disrupt the way a traditional eatery is run and lower manpower costs, too.

The 3D chocolate printer from South Korea, for instance, shapes chocolate based on the image sketched using 3D software.

The numbers tell the story of how tough the sector is.

According to the Accounting and Corporate Regulatory Authority, nearly half of the 369 cafes, coffeeshops and snack bars that registered their business in 2011 had closed shop by last year.

Still, Euromonitor predicts 4.4 per cent compound annual growth for the industry until 2018. By then, Singapore's \$6.1 billion food service industry will be worth \$7 billion.

But profit margins are likely to fall from the current 6.4 per cent to 5.2 per cent, something bound to hit the 5,636 F&B outlets here.

Mr Lim Chu Chong, **DBS** head of small and medium enterprises banking, said the event hopes to "marry the traditional with modern technology" as start-ups can support F&B operations.

One example is the robotic server developed by homegrown start-up Unitech Mechatronics which can transport food from the kitchen to the diner, thereby reducing the need for manpower.

The robot is priced at \$47,000, though F&B operators can obtain it at around \$6,000 if they are eligible for grants from the Infocomm Development Authority of Singapore.

Mr Richard Neubronner, the firm's specialist in the F&B sector, said three restaurants already plan to adopt the server. But the team will be developing it further so that the robot can reap over 15 per cent in cost savings.

Despite the hype over such gadgets, some F&B players are sceptical about industry and consumer acceptance.

Mr K. F. Seetoh, the food critic behind the Makansutra series, said: "The disconnect lies in expectations and lifestyle... There is a big group of people who still see food as food..."

"Once you are ready to take humanity out of a soulful culture like food, then we are ready for this."

Mr Christophe Megel, founder of F&B consultancy A-munition, is an advocate for "evolution, rather than revolution" in the way eateries are run.

"We can't stop progress... But I hope there will still be some room for traditional-style service restaurants," he said.

hphyllis@sph.com.sg

Guests at the Disrupt@The Bay event yesterday viewing Kodisoft's Interactive Restaurant Technology, a system that replaces human waiters and paper menus with multi-touch tables. The event, organised by **DBS**, comes as F&B operators face a crowded market, high overheads and labour shortages. -- PHOTO: **DBS**

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