

TODAY

Lifestyle»Food

Redefining Singapore's food and beverage industry



By Don Mendoza -
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SINGAPORE — In an increasingly health obsessed world, it would be easy fantasise about walking into our favourite restaurant and not worry about how many calories we could potentially overconsume; if only because the restaurant would be able to link up with your smartwatch or fitness tracker to recommend dishes that meet your intake requirements.

It may seem a little far-fetched, but the reality of such innovations, said Marius Robles, CEO of Reimagine Food, is closer than we think. He was one of the speakers at DBS' inaugural Disrupt @ The Bay event — a new series of events for SMEs and start-ups that aims to bring together traditional business owners and innovators. The first in the series that was held yesterday (June 10) was specially designed for the Singapore's Food and Beverage industry, which, according to Euromonitor International, is valued at S\$6.1 billion. But it is also an industry that has been hard hit by the recent labour crunch and rising costs in rental and raw materials. A survey

conducted last month by DBS BusinessClass (the programme behind the initiative) showed that F&B operators' biggest obstacles are lack of manpower and rising labour costs.

As such, "disruptive" technologies such as artificial intelligence, nutrigenetics, aerophonics and drones have begun to make their mark on the sector globally. In a statement provided by DBS, US\$48 billion of venture capital funds were raised for food start-ups in 2014, the highest since 2000.

The one-day event featured live demonstrations and speakers from Europe, India, Korea, Malaysia, Singapore and Taiwan, covering innovations such as drone and robot servers and digital gastronomy. The last, according to Reimagine Food, is the first global platform where chefs from around the world can promote their ideas, challenges and innovations while forging a closer relationship with local food producers and food and beverage companies.

It aims to create "high-impact future situations and events to showcase how new technology such as Cognitive Cooling will become part of our lives", from 3D food printing to Cognitive Cooking. This is a ground-breaking technology by IBM and the Institute of Culinary Education that helps cooks discover and create "utilising unusual ingredient combinations that man alone might never imagine"; it has resulted in a cookbook titled Cognitive Cooking with Chef Watson: Recipes for Innovation from IBM and the Institute of Culinary Education, which features more than 65 original recipes.

Robles also cited revolutionary initiatives such as chef-restaurateur David Chang's latest start-up, Maple, which is a restaurant "without a (physical) restaurant" space. The menu is curated by Chang and executive chef Soa Davies, but the only way New Yorkers can enjoy the dishes is by ordering them using the app.

Another revolution, he added, is in "food replacement" featuring companies behind products such as Soylent (a powdered meal replacement) and Hampton Creek which specialises in finding new ways of utilising plants in food products, such as its "smart cookies" and egg-free all-natural mayo. He also highlighted new gadgets — small in size and for a small price — that gives us "the power to know all about what we eat ... the facility to know if our food has pesticide in it or how many calories are in the dish". Products such as TellSpec, which "provides predictive intelligence about food".

He added that all these concepts and products are targeted at a global market, but Robles thinks that consumers, restaurants and brands of food have no idea that such products may be available at the end of the year and not in the next five years. "The (F&B) industry may not be ready, but the technology is now, is real," he said. "And the new needs of the consumer are real." He added that the point is not to change the way we celebrate food, but imagine instead the opportunity to empower diners with more personalised information to make more informed decisions. "It's a big revolution that is in the next year, probably. It's a global concept, a democratic concept."

We might even see restaurants in Singapore offering such a service in the next year. "I'm sure of it," Robles said, adding that he had already spoken with two restaurants here about the concept.