

Grooving to unity

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DENNIS CHUA learns of how two women set up a nightspot with the goal of uniting Malaysians through entertainment

THE “J Team” that is Jennifer Thomas and Joanne Yeoh is synonymous with popular jazz restaurant Groove Junction, housed for three years at a corner shop in Jalan 22A/70A, Desa Sri Hartamas, Kuala Lumpur.

The hardworking duo, arguably the best-known all-woman team managing an eatery with “great music and food”, also run eight-year-old Impact Idea Sdn Bhd, a corporate and investor relations, marketing and public relations firm.

Yeoh, who hails from Ipoh, says: “I was once in charge of Mines Golf Resort and was also the executive director of Sunrise Berhad, overseeing the company’s expansion to South Africa, Britain and the United States and its international schools such as Mont Kiara International School.” Thomas, who hails from Taiping, said: “At Impact Idea, we promote companies by profiling them in the media, as well as through road shows. The bigger the company, the bigger the promotion.” Thomas, who mooted the idea of Groove Junction, is its executive director while Yeoh is its managing director.

The restaurant, which opened in March 2007, has been “taking a break” since Jan 6 and is expected to open at a new location later this year.

She says: “We set up Groove to promote a dining experience to live entertainment music in Kuala Lumpur. Prior to this, I helped coordinate the first Sunrise Jazz Festival at Mont Kiara in 2000.” Groove Junction, Yeoh says, was formed based on feedback by residents of Desa Sri Hartamas and Mont Kiara, who wanted more “entertainment-based dining venues”.

She adds: “And its name is taken from Groove Junction, Jose Thomas’ (jazz guitarist and Thomas’ elder brother) first band. We added a “J” to “unction” because we are the ‘J Team’.” Jose and his son, drummer John Thomas (Young Drummer Of The Year 2009), have been performing regularly at the restaurant.

Thomas says: “Jose and John have given us support from day one. And through Jose and his fellow musicians, Groove has presented some of the region’s top musicians.” Besides Jose and John, other well-known musicians who have performed at Groove Junction include all-women rock group Candy, Francissca Peter, bassist Rozan Rahman and his wife, keyboardist Rie Tsuji (who backs up Beyonce), Hong Kong jazz star Angelita Li and American soul singers Denise Mininfield and the late Ernesta Dunbar.

“Last year we organised Groove J’Fest, which featured Jeremy Monteiro of Singapore, among others.

“We also had the Bold Brother In Comedy And Song with Allan And Indi, British band Ray Harris, French DJ Jean Pierre and Dutch bands Triba and The Buzz Brothers,” Thomas said.

“Monteiro also launched the Organamix Trio, which comprised him on the organ, Andrew Lim of Singapore (guitar) and Hong of Thailand (drums). They had a live recording,” Yeoh said.

One of the restaurant’s most “amazing” performers was the then Malaysia Airlines managing director Datuk Seri Idris Jala.

Yeoh says: “He’s a great guitarist and singer. He performed with his son Leon, and the diners loved them.” Thomas, who manages the artistes’ line-up and the restaurant’s branding and publicity, says its “break” was the result of its lease running out and its landlords’ “ridiculous terms”.



American soul singer Denise in her element

“We needed the break. We had been extremely busy running a consultancy by day and the restaurant by night. Guests even asked us if we ever slept, to which we answered ‘when we could afford to’,” she said.

Yeoh said: “Running Groove has been an ‘entrepreneurial experience’ with lots of sacrifices. No university degree could have provided this.” Thomas and Yeoh are looking at some locations for the restaurant.

Yeoh says: “We are waiting for some investors to lend a hand and sincere parties who may want to help. The entertainment business is expensive and almost borders on pure indulgence.” Thomas says: “The malls have been quite kind to us. What is important is a good, strategic location where customers converge.” The duo have had their fair share of “bad experiences” running the bistro.

“We had a few run-ins with the authorities concerning licences. We also had to deal with difficult musicians and policies by the authorities regarding foreign artistes,” Thomas says.

“There were times when customers took us for granted and wanted us to waive cover charges.” Difficulties aside, the duo do not believe in giving up because they derive great satisfaction seeing customers and friends enjoy themselves at shows and give feedback for improvement.

Yeoh says: “While running a nightspot may be deemed a man’s domain, we beg to differ. We’ve always believed we can do a good job.” She said the company’s shareholders were not able to run the restaurant as they were mostly outside Kuala Lumpur, and there were initially some staff who were not trustworthy.

“So we decided to run the restaurant. Nothing better than a hands-on experience by the founders,” she says.

Thomas says they learnt to think of a menu and design the interior of the restaurant with help from expert friends.

The restaurant was once an office and they spent three months re-designing it.

“Along the way we learnt to mix cocktails too,” she says, adding that Jose contributed ideas on designing the stage.

The duo are thankful to their loyal diners, musicians and their families for keeping the restaurant going. “They kept encouraging us when times were tough,” Yeoh says.

“And each time the going gets tough, we look at our restaurant photo gallery of the many fans and performers. They tell us how far we’ve gone and how much they appreciate us.” How will the new Groove Junction differ from the old one? “We’ll have more varied forms of music, not necessarily soul and jazz. And we’ll also have more stand-up comedians,” Thomas says.

“But our commitment to giving customers what they want in terms of food and music remains unchanged.” Thomas and Yeoh believe in entertainment because it unites people. “It is through entertainment that we bring down barriers and make friends. Entertainment is where the seeds of a united, global Malaysia are sown,” Thomas adds.