

The Jakarta Post
May 2014
1075 words

Cooking up one Better: Interview with Co-founder of F&B Magnate Ismaya Group

Text by Kindra Cooper; Photos courtesy of Ismaya Group

At 42, Christian Rijanto feels like he's over the hill – at least where nightlife is concerned. He owns and has conceptualized some of Jakarta's swankiest watering holes – Dragonfly, the award-winning Blowfish, and high-rise Skye Bistro & Lounge with rooftop views rivaling Singapore's Marina Bay Sands, infinity pool included. But the co-founder of F&B magnate ISMAYA Group believes that to capture a market, personal taste is tantamount to understanding your consumers. Hence it's time to tap an older demographic, with a high-end restaurant-and-bar concept under development which he reveals only as “not really a busy kind of place but with good food and drink.”

“As I grow older I can't go to clubs anymore with my friends,” Christian confesses, sheepishly adding that due to breakneck busyness overseeing 40-plus establishments, he tends to arrange social gatherings at his own eateries.

The Ismaya Group encompasses 14 F&B brands and counting, in addition to Ismaya Catering Co. and concert promoter Ismaya Live, which recently brought pop star Katy Perry to Indonesia. “Basically in Ismaya we do what we love so I happen to love eating, I love design, I love music, so those three things are the main focus of what we do so far,” explains the entrepreneur. Together with Ismaya co-founder Bram Hendrata and Brian Sutanto, also former invest bankers, Christian strives to create enduring brands synonymous not only with hospitality but the modern lifestyle, organizing the annual Jakarta Culinary Festival and the city's biggest dance music festival, Djakarta Warehouse Project. Property, hints Christian, may be next on their ambitious docket. “I think the ceiling is still quite high. We still have a long way to go.”

Competition in Jakarta's F&B industry is cutthroat - perhaps even more so than in metropolises like Sydney or Singapore where standalone restaurants flourish, he says. In traffic-plagued Jakarta, shopping malls serve as one-stop dining-entertainment-retail hubs, where under one roof over a hundred F&B outlets jostle wall-to-wall. “I like to hear when [customers] tell me ‘Somehow I feel like I'm in London or New York’,” he says, adding that the goal is not to replicate these destinations but to ensure that his brands are “as good as anywhere in the world.”

When Blowfish Japanese restaurant and bar opened in 2003, sushi was exclusive to supermarket delis and few restaurants stocked aperitifs unless some expats were hosting an under-the-table BYOB, with alcohol then considered taboo. “When I was studying in Boston I loved, loved, *loved* the American-Japanese fusion sushi. And [I and my business partners] really wanted to bring it here because we missed the food.” It was intended to be a small, 80-seater eatery in Teluk Betung, Central Jakarta, but a building permit

hiccup morphed into a blessing in disguise.

“We had the chef, we had all the other equipment but we had no place because we didn’t get the permit to do business in the area,” says Christian. The substitute space they found in Menteng, Jakarta’s elite neighborhood, was too cavernous just for seated dining, so they decided to introduce one of the first restaurant-cum-bars in the city. “We eventually figured out, okay, let’s complement [the food] with something. So while people wait they can have a drink, they can enjoy. We put on some music and it actually turned out very well. It became what it is today.”

Every new brand birthed is a distinct brainchild to guard against duplication of concept and tap a new market. “The principle is we make sure that when we open something new it doesn’t affect our existing brands. Otherwise they will just camouflage each other.” The eclectic Fook Yew Shanghai Bistro and Bubble Tea Lab hearkens to a roadside canteen in Shanghai strung with red lanterns, where hawker fare comes in folding-flap takeout boxes. Its kitschy décor and tongue-in-cheek name, a play on the Chinese words ‘Fook’, which means fortune and ‘yew’ meaning friends, designates the pop culture-savvy target market. “We feel that Chinese food here is good but it’s all very traditional. There wasn’t really a fun Chinese restaurant where you can just hang out, you can eat something more affordable and casual, nothing fancy.”

In charge of marketing and concept design for Ismaya, Christian maintains that building memorable brands requires consistency throughout product names, décor, menu, pricing - and no doubt the creativity he used to turn Magnum ice cream into a café concept of “sweet escape for pleasure-seekers” when retailer Unilever approached him for a brand activation project. Christian dreamed up chocolate-drizzled, fruit-bejeweled dishes with names like *Waffle de Aristocrat* and *De Rainbow District* now served at Magnum Cafés around the world.

Ismaya, founded in 2003, has exported some of its own brands, such as the Social House franchise in Dubai with views of the Burj Khalifa and a soon-to-open Kitchenette branch in Dubai (renamed ‘Markette’ to avoid duplication). Thailand, too, is being eyeballed for prospects. Quality control, says Christian, is the real clincher in the F&B business - hence the use of a Build-Operate-Transfer (BOT) franchising model so that Ismaya can retain ownership and control. Sushi Groove, the first brand to go international, did not fare well in Malaysia. “That was one of our key learning points so far. We didn’t do enough research about the market or the partners we would have there, and then we didn’t do enough localization,” says Christian.

At home, Christian feels the F&B industry is “underestimated”, but, he says, it may be due in part to the proliferation of themed restaurants so intent on décor and concept that food quality becomes secondary. “I’m not saying our food is amazing, but it has to be good enough and it has to be good value. The packaging and the design are the additional features to it,” he says. “A lot of people forget because they have a lot of ideas but they don’t know how to cook. Sometimes it’s very easy to create a good dish just one or two portions, but once you are in the restaurant, you’re serving 400 people a day - to manage

the system, to provide food and service which are consistent is not easy.”

Eleven years into the business and with sprawling office quarters on the 29th floor of Gandaria 8 Office Tower, Christian, who is married to fashion model Jessie Setiono, still maintains that the F&B business is no high-flying joyride. “It’s not glamorous, there’s no marble here,” he says gesturing around his office. “I think the key word is ‘fun’.”