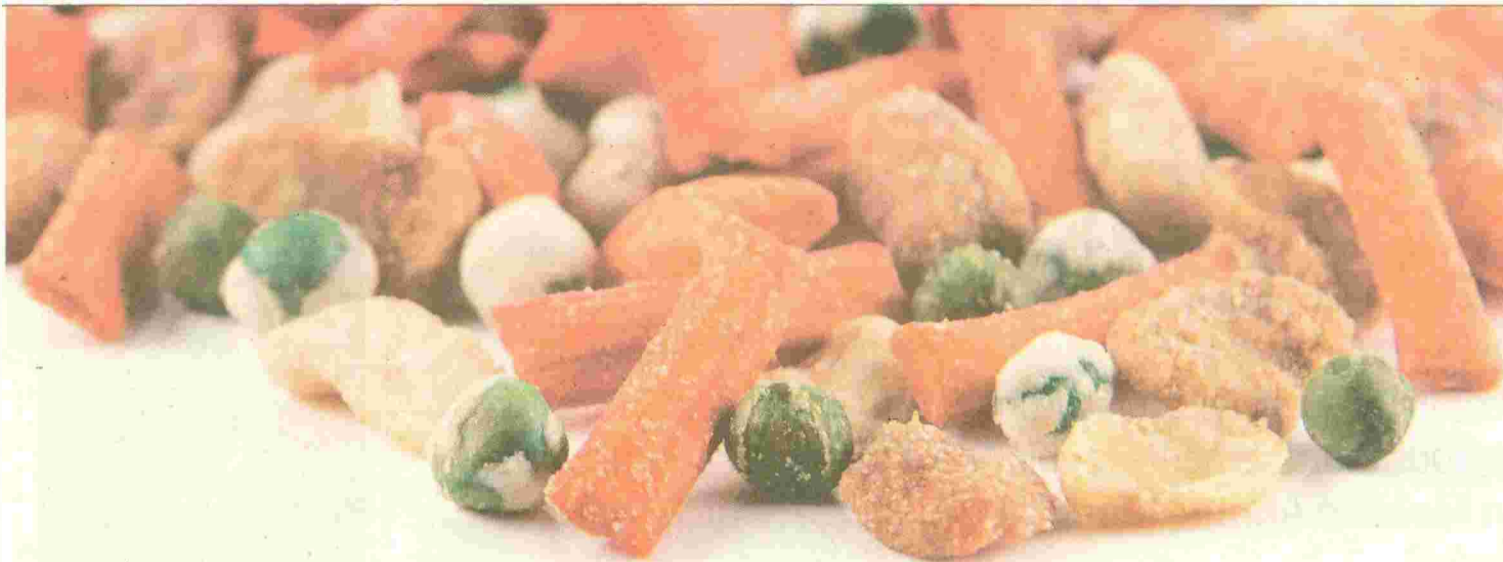


LIFE&TIMES PEOPLE



Retail is in the details

To succeed in the retail business, it's important to take care of the small things, writes **Aneeta Sundararaj**

Romy Karnaby dreams of turning *Castania Nut Boutique* into the Starbucks of nuts



LISTEN to successful entrepreneurs speak and many times, they'll say they sourced the raw materials locally.

But what if you have to import all raw materials? Take, for example, a company like Castania Nuts from Lebanon. It prides itself on the packaging process and its ability to provide an incomparable service.

Its owner and managing director, Romy Karnaby explains:

"We don't grow nuts in Lebanon."

Apparently, Lebanon does not have an agriculture-based economy. Lebanon is situated at the crossroads of the Mediterranean basin and the Arabian hinterland. It has become a regional centre for finance and trade.

In some way, this may be why Romy, 37, has a passion for business.

She is in Kuala Lumpur to open a Castania Nuts Boutique here. She says that in 1977, her father, Elias Daniel, started Cafe Daniel in the Dora region of Lebanon. He was, and still is, in the

coffee trade. In 1985, Castania, the Lebanese Roasting Company was created as a roasting and packaging company. By the end of the 20th century, it had expanded to become a leader in the roasted and pre-packed nuts sector.

By then, armed with a Bachelor of Arts degree in Economics from the American University of Beirut, Romy joined the family business, where she learnt the trade of the pre-packed nuts business.

In 2008, she decided to expand the business and create Castania Nuts Boutique, where customers are promised an exceptional experience with fresh, dry roasted nuts, dried fruit,

chocolates, candies and associated gifting items.

From then, there were more boutiques opened in Kuwait; a total of 90 boutiques are scheduled to be opened in the Gulf region.

In Malaysia, other than the first outlet in IUtama Shopping Centre, Petaling Jaya, the franchisee of Castania Nuts Boutique, Bakhache Luxuries Sdn Bhd, plans to open another two in KL's Nu Sentral and Pavilion KL.

"Retail is in details," says Romy. "We look at packaging, training the staff, the materials we use, the quality of the nuts... everything."

Leaning back in her chair, she says "I want Castania Nut Boutique to become like the Starbucks of nuts."

The mother of two (Naya, 10, and Karim, 6) adds: "We let you choose the nuts, taste them and make up your own packets. We import

macadamias from Australia; seeds from Russia and China, almonds from Spain and pistachios from Iran."

As a business owner, she says, she has no regrets as she's done everything she wanted to. She adds that anyone at all that wants to run a business needs to have some basic idea of how to read a financial report. "You are accountable for the business. If you don't know how to read a report, how are you going to know the basics of how things work in your business?"

It is hard to gain a perspective of what she'd be like outside of work because all her stories about family life seem to revolve around the business.

"At family dinners, we're always talking about the business, expansion plans, ideas to make things better and new products," she says.

Even her memories of childhood are associated with the business. "On weekends, my father would take me and my siblings (there are four of us) to the factory where we would help the workers seal the packets," she says. Any free time after school was spent managing the family's accounts.

"You know," she says, "Lebanon is very small. In 45 minutes, we can go from the sea to the mountain. Our lifestyle is such that everybody knows everybody. We have many friends and we're all close to each other. I am very attached to life and I am afraid of dying. I love life and I wouldn't want to leave my children when they're young."

Finally, unable to veer far from her favourite topic for long, she adds: "Our nuts can be a sweet or savoury treat. They are good snacks. They're healthy. This is not a store only for VIPs. We also cater to the upper middle class in the market."

The ultimate vision? To become a global leader in the nuts industry, an internationally-recognised brand that transcends borders to spread Lebanese savoir faire in nuts around the world.

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