

Sweet success

Pierre Ledent not only has a talent for making chocolates, he also has a head for business, writes Aneeta Sundararaj

FOR many teenagers who have completed their secondary school education, picking the right career path is often a difficult task. It was not so for Pierre Ledent. In fact, he knew what he was going to do when he was 12: he was going to join the family business.

"Even on Saturdays, I used to go and work with my parents," says this native of Belgium, which is precisely why it comes as no surprise that Ledent and his family are pastry chefs and master chocolatiers.

Reading the 41-year-old's resume alone will make anyone with a sweet tooth sigh. Other than pastries and chocolates, Ledent can also bake, make confectioneries, ice-cream and ice sculptures. That he tastes every batch of chocolate he makes will make you green with envy at his trim figure.

When he completed basic schooling, Ledent enrolled in vocational school, and was an apprentice at his father's shop. From then on, his rise in the industry has been steady. He started by selling his chocolates in departmental stores. "While the experience was good, I had no control over the marketing or the final price."

In 2000, Ledent decided that it was time to sell his chocolates directly to his customers and this meant travelling overseas. The two countries he mentions most are China and Japan. Success in China was immediate, but not in Japan. "The Japanese are very particular and the quality has to be very high." Never-

theless, by 2008, sales of his chocolates there were on the rise as well.

Despite projecting the persona of a suave businessman, there is a trace of mischief in his eyes, especially when he says: "The culture in Japan is very different. After work, the men will have dinner, then go out and drink. After that, they will go back to their wives. In Belgium, if you do that, the wife will tell you to shut up."

Ledent then took the plunge and, in 2010, opened a "salon" in Brussels specialising in high quality chocolates. "I don't believe in franchising," he says. "I like to find partners in each country and then we do business together."

Having a good head for business, it makes perfect sense that he sets up any new venture in a structured and analytical way. The first thing he thinks about is the country. "I look at the cost of living. I went to four places in this region; I came to Malaysia four times before choosing KL."

He visited three shopping complexes in the Klang Valley and, eventually, chose Bangsar Shopping Centre. "In other places, many people visit, but no one buys. People who come here, they buy."

Finally, he selects his business partner. "I call it 'complementary association'. I am good at making the chocolate. I need someone who is good in marketing; someone who is good at selling the chocolates for me."

In Malaysia, Ledent has been in business for approximately three months and started some 10 days before Valentine's Day. By Feb 14, his first batch of chocolates had sold out and a new order had to be imported, fast. Since then, his utterly delicious chocolates have been presented to royalty and many VIPs. Society brides have already started placing orders to use his chocolates as wedding favours.

What makes Ledent's chocolates absolutely delicious is that he uses



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only the very best ingredients: the cocoa beans come from Africa, South America and Indonesia; nuts are from Italy, almonds from Spain or Portugal and pistachios from Sicily.

Then, each ingredient is meticulously prepared. As Ledent is quick to point out, one can't just plonk nuts into a chocolate and say they're of high quality. "You have to cook them, caramelise them and make them perfect for the chocolate. You have to 'marinate' them." While certain tasks are automated, most of the decorations and final touches are done by hand.

Just as jewellery is presented in beautiful boxes, so are Pierre Ledent

chocolates. The chocolates come in exclusive, hand-crafted boxes. On special occasions, he autographs these boxes. "Before Valentine's Day, I sometimes sign up to 3,000 boxes."

Ledent's chocolates are now available in more than 100 locations worldwide and include countries like the UK, Australia and Germany. When you visit his "salon", sit back and savour the products of Pierre Ledent's talent. You are bound to see that his care and attention to detail have ensured that something which can be bitter, dry and chalky has been transformed into something beautiful, silken and astonishingly delicious. ✉ features@nst.com.my

