CARVING A NICHE
Huber’s Butchery is a family business that remains rooted to its values of making meat products the traditional way, while readying for the future by boosting productivity and preparing to export.

I n 2007, a pair of young brothers Andre and Ryan Huber had just started their fledgling butchery business with a dream to introduce European-styled premium meat products to Singapore. Later joined by their father Ernst Huber, who was a trained butcher in his native Switzerland and also a former chef, the trio had big plans to grow the company. But the early days of Huber’s Butchery was anything but smooth sailing. Just a year after it started, it became embroiled in a long-drawn court case that eventually lasted till 2014, involving a messy split from a previous butchery business where Mr Ernst Huber was formerly a shareholder.

“This was a painful time in the six years because we could not borrow any money from the bank,” recalls young son Andre Huber, executive director of Huber’s Butchery. “I could not even get a credit card or a bank loan. But we learnt how to be frugal and how to expand within our means.”

The butchery business began in 2007 when the brothers saw a gap in the market for quality meat products and services. “When you go to the supermarket, the person at the counter can’t even tell you if the beef is grass-fed or grain-fed, and how to cook it,” muses Mr Huber.

Determined to address this, Huber’s Butchery was created – not only to provide world-class meat products, but also to provide outstanding service by advising customers on what they are buying, where the meat comes from, and how to cook it,” he adds. “Of course, when you bring in quality products, the customers will come. But they can be value for money.”

The business first opened a meat counter at NTUC FairPrice Finest in Bukit Timah Plaza. But the experience was not quite as “fine” as the brothers had hoped that it would be. “Some would get beef, walk around half the NTUC and then toss it into the bread section, and we had to bear the cost of it,” says Mr Huber.

The trio decided to open its first retail store at Goh & Goh Building next to Beauty World, followed by another at Tanglin Post Office. But after running into issues with the location at Tanglin Post Office, they decided to pull out of there.

“It was a learning phase – I searched around my network of chefs, and found an organic store in 18 Dempsey Road that was giving up the premises, and negotiated to take over the space,” says Mr Huber.

This led the brothers to decide to open its first retail store at Goh & Goh Building in 2010. While the retail store is generally what customers would know about Huber’s, it is only part of the business. The other half of Huber’s revenue comes from wholesale business, from supermarkets and hotels in Singapore. The factory and office in Pandan Loop is where most products are manufactured, including those that are imported and sub-branded in terms of portion control and labelling.

“We built a playground as well because my brother and I have young families. We were always struggling to think of where to go for a coffee and the kids can play,” says Mr Huber. “Next, parents know it because of the playground – they love bringing their kids to Huber’s.”

MEETING UP
Although the new space allows the Hubers to offer a wider range of retail stores where customers can buy directly and have more choices. This is a walk across the opening outdoor space of Huber’s Butchery at Dempsey Hill, and one can almost mistake it for a setting in Bruges or Amsterdam. With lush greenery dotted by fish pools and hard gardens, it is clear that the business has found an opportunity to maintain a tranquil environment for its customers to relax and enjoy.

“We built a playground as well because my brother and I have young families. We were always struggling to think of where to go for a coffee and the kids can play,” says Mr Huber. “Next, parents know it because of the playground – they love bringing their kids to Huber’s.”

Apart from the outdoor area, the retail space was similarly equipped with much thought – it even won design awards. It does not have the typical feel of a supermarket as the butchery was conceived with much thought – it even won design awards.

“We built a playground as well because my brother and I have young families. We were always struggling to think of where to go for a coffee and the kids can play,” says Mr Huber. “Next, parents know it because of the playground – they love bringing their kids to Huber’s.”

MEETING UP
Although the new space allows the Hubers to offer a wider range of retail stores where customers can buy directly and have more choices. This is a walk across the opening outdoor space of Huber’s Butchery at Dempsey Hill, and one can almost mistake it for a setting in Bruges or Amsterdam. With lush greenery dotted by fish pools and hard gardens, it is clear that the business has found an opportunity to maintain a tranquil environment for its customers to relax and enjoy.

“We built a playground as well because my brother and I have young families. We were always struggling to think of where to go for a coffee and the kids can play,” says Mr Huber. “Next, parents know it because of the playground – they love bringing their kids to Huber’s.”

Apart from the outdoor area, the retail space was similarly equipped with much thought – it even won design awards. It does not have the typical feel of a supermarket as the butchery was conceived with much thought – it even won design awards.

“We built a playground as well because my brother and I have young families. We were always struggling to think of where to go for a coffee and the kids can play,” says Mr Huber. “Next, parents know it because of the playground – they love bringing their kids to Huber’s.”

MEETING UP
Although the new space allows the Hubers to offer a wider range of retail stores where customers can buy directly and have more choices. This is a walk across the opening outdoor space of Huber’s Butchery at Dempsey Hill, and one can almost mistake it for a setting in Bruges or Amsterdam. With lush greenery dotted by fish pools and hard gardens, it is clear that the business has found an opportunity to maintain a tranquil environment for its customers to relax and enjoy.

“We built a playground as well because my brother and I have young families. We were always struggling to think of where to go for a coffee and the kids can play,” says Mr Huber. “Next, parents know it because of the playground – they love bringing their kids to Huber’s.”

Apart from the outdoor area, the retail space was similarly equipped with much thought – it even won design awards. It does not have the typical feel of a supermarket as the butchery was conceived with much thought – it even won design awards.

“We built a playground as well because my brother and I have young families. We were always struggling to think of where to go for a coffee and the kids can play,” says Mr Huber. “Next, parents know it because of the playground – they love bringing their kids to Huber’s.”

MEETING UP
Although the new space allows the Hubers to offer a wider range of retail stores where customers can buy directly and have more choices. This is a walk across the opening outdoor space of Huber’s Butchery at Dempsey Hill, and one can almost mistake it for a setting in Bruges or Amsterdam. With lush greenery dotted by fish pools and hard gardens, it is clear that the business has found an opportunity to maintain a tranquil environment for its customers to relax and enjoy.

“We built a playground as well because my brother and I have young families. We were always struggling to think of where to go for a coffee and the kids can play,” says Mr Huber. “Next, parents know it because of the playground – they love bringing their kids to Huber’s.”

Apart from the outdoor area, the retail space was similarly equipped with much thought – it even won design awards. It does not have the typical feel of a supermarket as the butchery was conceived with much thought – it even won design awards.
and continue to contribute to the business, he has told his sons that the company abides by family values. “The philosophy behind this was that he wanted my brother and I to own the business, and not feel like we are working for our dad,” explains the younger Mr Huber.

“If it’s my brother and I owning the business, we are actually responsible for the livelihood of the employees. We feel this greater need to put in extra effort to make sure the business is successful,” he says.

As a family business, Mr Ernst Huber says, the company abides by family values. “We never have a discussion at the end of the year about making more money, which the big corporations do,” he explains. “We talk about how we can improve the quality and service for our customers – those are the main aims of the business, not about money.”

And while the retail store places a great deal of emphasis on having a personal touch, the company is trying to digitalise to increase productivity, Mr Andre Huber says: “We are machinery and software to help in efficiency and the accuracy of our business. Of course, it’s not so easy to do so in the shop because it’s about service. But in the factory, we can get a lot more on productivity.”

Some small ways in which the company has invested in productivity includes software that tracks deliveries to improve efficiency and accountability, as well as a printer that allows invoices to be documented as soft copy so that nothing will get lost.

It is also not the only way that the business is trying to modernise – Huber’s Butchery is also ramping up its online marketing for online deliveries. Its website was launched last year, complete with videos and recipes. Its YouTube channel – which has about 15,000 followers – teaches viewers how to cook a steak, sharpen knives or to debone a chicken.

Huber’s Butchery also has a presence on social media, and is active on platforms such as Facebook and Instagram so as to attract more customers and build a community.

THE HEAT IS ON

Currently, online sales make up about 2 per cent of sales but Mr Huber says that there is a lot more potential to grow in this area. However, he notes, growth is limited by capacity issues. For example, while he would like to expand the online delivery business, the company has only two trucks for home deliveries from online sales.

As each truck can only handle up to 25 deliveries a day, the company will have to invest in more trucks, more drivers, more space, and more manpower to prepare the items, he explains.

The company is also looking to export its products overseas to neighbouring countries, but again, it is limited by capacity. “As it is now, the factory is already bursting at the seams,” Mr Huber says. “We are running two shifts just to cope with demand, and we know we can’t continue functioning like this.”

Huber’s next big project now is to look for a much bigger space, and another possible factory somewhere else, but this is much more complicated. “We would require them to spend a lot of time overseas.”

As each truck can only handle up to 25 deliveries a day, the company will have to invest in more trucks, more drivers, more space, and more manpower to prepare the items, he explains.

Despite the challenges that have beset them, the trio are still optimistic about the prospects – even in a fickle, saturated market like Singapore. Mr Ernst Huber adds: “It boils down to these three things: quality, service and value for money. If you have these three things, you’re in business. If you don’t have one, you have a problem. If you don’t have two of them, your business. It’s quite simple, but a lot of people don’t understand this – that is why you see so many opening and then closing six months later.”

Mr Andre Huber adds that the business is still managing to stay in business from competition, thanks to its insistence on the three values. It is not “rocket science”, but about maintaining standards, he says. “We are not trying to be the biggest meat company in the world – we just want to be the best.”

When asked if there were any plans to move production overseas, the Hubers give a firm no. This is a question often posed to them because of the much cheaper manufacturing costs abroad. But as the two brothers have young families, Mr Huber says, it was not an option that they planned to look into as it would require them to spend a lot of time overseas.

“As we checked on Singapore – it’s going to cost more, it’s not going to be easy to find manpower, but at least here in Singapore, we can control the quality,” he explains. “Since we are trying to sell very good quality products, we can afford to charge a slightly higher price.”

Also, another big reason why they chose to stay in Singapore is because of the Singapore brand. The label of where the meat products come from means a lot to many countries, he explains.

When asked if there were any plans to move production overseas, the Hubers give a firm no. This is a question often posed to them because of the much cheaper manufacturing costs abroad. But as the two brothers have young families, Mr Huber says, it was not an option that they planned to look into as it would require them to spend a lot of time overseas.

“When asked if there were any plans to move production overseas, the Hubers give a firm no. This is a question often posed to them because of the much cheaper manufacturing costs abroad. But as the two brothers have young families, Mr Huber says, it was not an option that they planned to look into as it would require them to spend a lot of time overseas.”

Mr Huber says that there is a lot more potential to grow in this area. However, he notes, growth is limited by capacity issues. For example, while he would like to expand the online delivery business, the company has only two trucks for home deliveries from online sales.

As each truck can only handle up to 25 deliveries a day, the company will have to invest in more trucks, more drivers, more space, and more manpower to prepare the items, he explains.

Despite the challenges that have beset them, the trio are still optimistic about the prospects – even in a fickle, saturated market like Singapore. Mr Ernst Huber adds: “It boils down to these three things: quality, service and value for money. If you have these three things, you’re in business. If you don’t have one, you have a problem. If you don’t have two of them, your business. It’s quite simple, but a lot of people don’t understand this – that is why you see so many opening and then closing six months later.”

Mr Andre Huber adds that the business is still managing to stay in business from competition, thanks to its insistence on the three values. It is not “rocket science”, but about maintaining standards, he says. “We are not trying to be the biggest meat company in the world – we just want to be the best.”

When asked if there were any plans to move production overseas, the Hubers give a firm no. This is a question often posed to them because of the much cheaper manufacturing costs abroad. But as the two brothers have young families, Mr Huber says, it was not an option that they planned to look into as it would require them to spend a lot of time overseas.

“As we checked on Singapore – it’s going to cost more, it’s not going to be easy to find manpower, but at least here in Singapore, we can control the quality,” he explains. “Since we are trying to sell very good quality products, we can afford to charge a slightly higher price.”

Also, another big reason why they chose to stay in Singapore is because of the Singapore brand. The label of where the meat products come from means a lot to many countries, he explains.

Despite the challenges that have beset them, the trio are still optimistic about the prospects – even in a fickle, saturated market like Singapore. Mr Ernst Huber adds: “It boils down to these three things: quality, service and value for money. If you have these three things, you’re in business. If you don’t have one, you have a problem. If you don’t have two of them, your business. It’s quite simple, but a lot of people don’t understand this – that is why you see so many opening and then closing six months later.”

Mr Andre Huber adds that the business is still managing to stay in business from competition, thanks to its insistence on the three values. It is not “rocket science”, but about maintaining standards, he says. “We are not trying to be the biggest meat company in the world – we just want to be the best.”

When asked if there were any plans to move production overseas, the Hubers give a firm no. This is a question often posed to them because of the much cheaper manufacturing costs abroad. But as the two brothers have young families, Mr Huber says, it was not an option that they planned to look into as it would require them to spend a lot of time overseas.

“As we checked on Singapore – it’s going to cost more, it’s not going to be easy to find manpower, but at least here in Singapore, we can control the quality,” he explains. “Since we are trying to sell very good quality products, we can afford to charge a slightly higher price.”

Also, another big reason why they chose to stay in Singapore is because of the Singapore brand. The label of where the meat products come from means a lot to many countries, he explains.

Despite the challenges that have beset them, the trio are still optimistic about the prospects – even in a fickle, saturated market like Singapore. Mr Ernst Huber adds: “It boils down to these three things: quality, service and value for money. If you have these three things, you’re in business. If you don’t have one, you have a problem. If you don’t have two of them, your business. It’s quite simple, but a lot of people don’t understand this – that is why you see so many opening and then closing six months later.”

Mr Andre Huber adds that the business is still managing to stay in business from competition, thanks to its insistence on the three values. It is not “rocket science”, but about maintaining standards, he says. “We are not trying to be the biggest meat company in the world – we just want to be the best.”

When asked if there were any plans to move production overseas, the Hubers give a firm no. This is a question often posed to them because of the much cheaper manufacturing costs abroad. But as the two brothers have young families, Mr Huber says, it was not an option that they planned to look into as it would require them to spend a lot of time overseas.

“As we checked on Singapore – it’s going to cost more, it’s not going to be easy to find manpower, but at least here in Singapore, we can control the quality,” he explains. “Since we are trying to sell very good quality products, we can afford to charge a slightly higher price.”

Also, another big reason why they chose to stay in Singapore is because of the Singapore brand. The label of where the meat products come from means a lot to many countries, he explains.

Despite the challenges that have beset them, the trio are still optimistic about the prospects – even in a fickle, saturated market like Singapore. Mr Ernst Huber adds: “It boils down to these three things: quality, service and value for money. If you have these three things, you’re in business. If you don’t have one, you have a problem. If you don’t have two of them, your business. It’s quite simple, but a lot of people don’t understand this – that is why you see so many opening and then closing six months later.”

Mr Andre Huber adds that the business is still managing to stay in business from competition, thanks to its insistence on the three values. It is not “rocket science”, but about maintaining standards, he says. “We are not trying to be the biggest meat company in the world – we just want to be the best.”