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**Sweet Success**

*Ya Kun spreads the love of kaya toast to Japan*

Since its humble beginnings as a small coffee stall at Telok Ayer Basin in 1944, Ya Kun has made its mark on the local scene as being synonymous to traditional kaya toast. Now with 30 branches in Singapore and more than 20 outlets in six other Asian countries, the company is on its way to spreading the love of one of Singapore's signature snacks to the rest of the world.



One of the overseas markets that Ya Kun has chosen to penetrate is Japan. First opening its doors to the Japanese public in October 2006 at LaLaport Toyosu, a major retail and entertainment complex in Tokyo, Ya Kun has been so well received that the company plans to launch five more outlets in Tokyo and expand to other parts of Japan.

But every successful venture starts somewhere, so what led Ya Kun to open a branch in Japan in the first place? Foremost on the list is the Japanese consumers' receptivity to foreign food. It certainly helps that about 600,000 Japanese tourists visit Singapore yearly and are thus exposed to local cuisine.

After observing that kaya was one such local food that is popular among the Japanese, Ya Kun took its initial steps toward exploring the Japanese market. Luckily, the company received networking support from International Enterprise (IE) Singapore, the lead agency under the Ministry of Trade and Industry promoting the overseas growth of Singapore-based enterprises.

IE Singapore has been encouraging locally based companies to venture into the food services market in Japan. The country's population of close to 128 million and the Japanese consumers' high purchasing power make it an attractive destination for investors.

"We were fortunate to be introduced by IE Singapore to our current partner, Maruha Restaurant Systems (MRS), which operated a chain of restaurants in Japan," Adrin Loi, Executive Chairman at Ya Kun, said.

He added, "Subsequently we were invited by the Japan External Trade Organisation (JETRO) to go on a business exploration and learning trip to Japan. MRS also visited our outlets in Singapore. The visits were later followed by a series of discussions before the joint venture materialised."



The Bank of Japan (BOJ) also had a hand in easing Ya Kun's expansion to Japan. BOJ offered the company a capital loan with competitive interest rates that other banks might not have been able to match.

Loi said, "This was great help for our first step into the market."

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