

# 'Che da Mee Udang Galah' forging a way forward!

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## Prologue

It was a long day for Che Da, the female owner of the Che Da Mee Udang Galah. The night was falling, and Che Da should devise a workable plan by the early morning. She was still struggling to find the right answer to her question and her desire to keep going with her Che Da Mee business:

“How to survive this difficult time of COVID-19?, how to arrange the money to get the money to buy the daily supplies? And How to keep business going with the business as no or little customers visiting her current premise?”

## The Journey of Che Da Mee Udang Galah

Che Da was thinking about starting her food business in early 2017. She was in great trouble and finding it difficult to survive with her ill-ridden husband. She has five children three girls and two sons. The food business seemed the best option for her as she learned cooking while working in a local restaurant before marrying her husband. Her entrepreneurial husband worked in a car repair shop, and later, after gaining confidence, he ran and owned the car repair shop himself. However, her husband fell ill and experienced a prolonged illness that came out as early-stage cancer. Due to the illness, he could no longer look after her workshop. So, things became complicated for Che Da. She must start working to earn money to sustain her family and her husband's medical care costs. She realised that now shouldering her husband's responsibility as the sole breadwinner.

Now, it is up to Che Da to take care of the home's financial matters, consider some business options, and choose one of the best. First, she talked to her husband, her children, and other close relatives. After having a detailed discussion with everyone and taking note of her previous cooking experience. In mid-2017, Che Da started her business venture with the name 'Che Da Mee Udang Galah' near her house on Pejabat Road, Dabong area in Kuala Kari, Kelantan.

'Che da Mee Udang Galah' offers a variety of Malaysian food, but the shop's speciality is the king-size prawn, also called 'King prawns of Malaysia', served with thick curry gravy and noodles; this menu would be irresistible. These king-size prawns are available in the Kelantan River and are called giant freshwater river prawns. Some can be sourced and supplied in the Dabong

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## Keywords

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area from local inland fishermen for food purposes. She operated her business in front of Gua Ikan, a famous limestone hill that attracts visitors.

Due to the cooking acumen and experience that she gained, Che da developed her unique recipe for the king-size prawn soup with noodles. Her noodle got overwhelming acceptance from customers who visit the touristy place with their families.

Due to its taste, customers promoted her noodle through social media. The recipe became an instant success, and visitors across the Kelantan state like to taste the king prawn soup with noodles.

However, Covid 19 pandemic struck the whole country, and when the lockdown was imposed in early 2020, Che Da's business was also affected. And when the Covid 19 lockdown was uplifted in Kelantan, The Dabong Local authority offered Che Da a new premise near the Dabong Railway Station.

Thanks to Covid 19, the restriction of interstate mobility due to the Movement Control Order popularised 'Train to Dabong'. Visiting and eating at Che Da Mee Udang Galah, situated a stone's throw from Dabong Railway Station, is one of the trips in the Dabong for visitors.

The early success builds the confidence of Che da, and she rents a shop and works five days a week to earn handsome money for her family. Her children primarily work in the business, which helps reduce the business's operational costs.

### **The food business in Malaysia**

Malaysian society experienced rapid modernization, and the emergence of influential middle-income groups was observed in Malaysia from the early 1990s. The lifestyle change is observable as the Malaysian population is in the process of compressed monetarization that impacts Malaysia's food culture. The Malaysian population experienced rural exodus and urbanization, reaching 75%. Many people moved to urban areas living alone in small houses without cooking facilities. Men and women are working, and eating out or buying ready-to-eat food is the most suitable option.

In Malaysia, eating out is a social activity that enables people to know each other and experience diverse or novel food. Malaysian love to create an atmosphere of warmth and harmony to eat with friends and family. Eating out offers relaxation, celebration and connection while enjoying the diverse culinary traditions. The abundance of food options is a vital attribute of the Malaysian eating-out culture. The extensive selection ranges Malay, Indian, Chinese, Arabic and Thai food options. That may include nasi lemak, nasi Kaku, satay, roti canai, nasi biryani, roti tampayan and many more.

However, recently the themed café and restaurants have started emerging in Malaysia, offering unique and innovative dining experiences. These themed café and restaurants remain vastly popular among young and affluent classes. 'Mamak' stalls are still popular as these are open 24/7, offering a place for social gatherings with late-night meals at affordable prices. Roti canai, murtabak with the teh tarik (milk tea).

Malaysian food is not complete without seafood. Malaysia has thousands of kilometres of shoreline with rivers and lakes offering a variety of seafood. Salt and fresh water seafood are heavily consumed by Malaysian, and steamed, baked, curry, stir-fried, and soup are the loved seafood.

### **COVID-19 in Southeast Asia and specifically in Malaysia**

COVID-19 started in Wuhan, China, in late 2019, and the viral disease spread across the globe. The spread of COVID-19, with the increased infection and deaths, shocked the world and remains unpredictable. The uncontrolled spread of COVID-19 and the massive death toll severely affected the 'business-as-usual' norms, and the world economy faced an economic shutdown, bringing huge losses and a decline in economic and social activities. At the global level, 572 million get infected with COVID-19, and the death toll reached 6.3 million.

The South Eastern Asian countries also experienced the spread of COVID-19 and The Malaysian government implement a lockdown from 18 March 2020 to January 2021 with the name movement control order (MCO) to reduce the spread of COVID-19. The implementation of MCO reduced socio-economic activities, and people lived in the perception of fear. Many low-income families struggle to survive in the COVID- MCO times. Lockdown is not a perpetual and welcoming strategy to control the spread of COVID-19, but only a strategy to prevent the spread of COVID-19. The MCO-02 was implemented from 11th January 2021 to early March 2021. The Malaysian National COVID-19 immunisation started on 5th March 2021, and it helped to restore public confidence and preparedness reflected in terms of preparedness to reduce the consequence of COVID-19. The national recovery program started from 15 June 2021 to January 2022, where every adult resident of Malaysia got two doses of COVID-19 vaccination with an additional booster shot. The recent figures depict that 4.7 million individuals were infected in Malaysia, and the death toll reached 16000 by the end of 2021.



*Figure 1: Che Mee brand logo*

## **Che Da Challenge**

As a woman, Che Da faced many hardships being raised in the working class and always looking for business startup opportunities. The savings were good for starting a small food business to earn handsome money for her family. With family support and savings at hand, Che Da received valuable advice to build a successful business. However, the advent of COVID-19 posed an obstacle to running and earning money. The MCO postured further difficulty, and all the food businesses had to close. The only option left is to prepare the food and sell it online. However, money became another problem in initiating the business in post-COVID-19 times.

Che Da must evaluate and decide among her few options to arrange the resources to start and sustain her business. That can enable her to feed her family and render her financial responsibilities. She can think of three following options.

### **Looking towards family**

Che Da has her family living in the same village. However, these people are already not much rich to offer financial support in this time of need. Another thing is that with COVID-19, everyone is staying at home and using their savings to survive this difficult time. My husband has been ill for the last five years, a primary reason I started my own food business.

She stated:

*"I belong to a low-income family, and many of my relatives work as labourers earning daily wages. No one can offer me financial help in this difficult time. Most of my relatives are not saving much to survive this COVID-19 time".*

### **Looking towards bank**

Che da can talk to the bank to borrow the money to survive in the COVID-19 times. However, Che da already takes a loan from her bank for RM 5000 at the start of her business. She is still paying the loan instalment, and her bank may not be interested in providing another loan. Another issue is that banks may require a guarantee and charge an interest rate on the borrowed money.

She stated:

*"I am worried that my bank may not offer me another loan, As unable to pay back all the loan amount to the bank. I must think of something else".*



*Figure 2: Che da Mee Food*



*Figure 3: Che da Mee Food options*

### **Looking for partnerships with suppliers**

Che Da thinks about asking for the supplies to make the food sell. The usual supplies that Che Da need to buy every day are cooking oil, vegetables and lobsters. Buying the king lobster is a significant cost that Che Da have to pay every day. Suppose Che Da can negotiate a reasonable deal with the lobster supplier. I can help Che Da to keep running her business and sustain herself in the difficult time of COVID-19.

She stated:

*"To be resilient in our business, we must continuously get reasonably priced supplies. Suppliers are the major partner of our kind of business. Every business has product, price, place, promotion and people. However, the supplier plays an important role in the success and resilience of any business".*

## **Epilogue**

Che Da needs to strategise and decide which option is better to select. She also needs to devise the appropriate plan for all three options and pitch the idea for each option. If she chooses option 1, she must consider the appropriate family member or friend to talk to and ask for money to keep running her business. If she plans for option 2, she must look for a suitable bank to borrow the money and offer the appropriate security to gain the loan.

Lastly, if Che Da decides to figure out some partnership arrangement with her supplier, she needs to determine what she can offer and gain in the respective deal. One thing that Che Da is very much sure of is that Che Da Mee must survive the COVID-19 time and lead her family out of the challenge posed by the lockdown.