



Mr Hisato Hamada is co-founder of Wagyumafia, which runs six members-only restaurants in Tokyo and Hong Kong, and is a global supplier of top-tier wagyu. Outlets in Manila, London and Singapore are on the cards for next year. ST PHOTO: SHINTARO TAY

ItChangedMyLife

He serves up beef a cut above the rest

Wagyumafia co-founder a university dropout who hit rock bottom before tasting success



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Hisato Hamada is seated in front of the Guangzhou Mian Shi Wanton Noodle stall in Tanglin Halt, happily digging into what he pronounces to be the best wanton noodles he has ever tasted.

"I like this better than the wanton noodles in Hong Kong. It's the chilli sauce – it's so good."

The 42-year-old knows his local eats, having once lived here for a few years and compiled a Singapore street food guide for Japanese tourists.

After polishing off his noodles, he heads for the nearby Faith Baptist Church to pay his respects to his late Singaporean friend Edwin Ng.

It is something he tries to do when he is in Singapore. Mr Ng – a former Economic Development Board executive who died of lung cancer in 2012 – was a dear friend, someone who offered his ear and shoulder when times were bleak.

Mr Hamada says his pal played a key role in his success story, one which saw him hitting rock bottom – professionally and personally – before bouncing back to become one of the most high-profile players in the kobe beef industry.

He is the co-founder of Wagyumafia, which runs six members-only restaurants in Tokyo and Hong Kong, and is a global supplier of top-tier wagyu.

He is also the man behind the world's most expensive wagyu sandwich, one which costs a pocket-busting 50,000 yen (\$\$656) and which counts footballer David Beckham and Twitter chief executive Jack Dorsey as big fans.

A stylish man with a ruddy complexion and an edgy haircut, Mr

Hamada is the elder of two children of a retired economics professor and a homemaker.

His childhood was peripatetic; he spent a year in Kuala Lumpur and four in Sydney before he turned 10.

The experience made him quick at adapting. But it also made him outspoken, a quality which did not wash well with his Japanese classmates, who told him they didn't like him.

Feeling stifled, he told his parents he wanted to study in the United States when he was 16. His parents gave him their blessings but told him he would have to find his own way.

Undaunted, the young and resourceful teen got himself a scholarship and went to Alabama, where he completed two years of high school, and 1½ years of pre-law studies at the University of Alabama before dropping out.

"I thought I would like law but I didn't," says Mr Hamada.

His plan to resume his tertiary education in Japan was abandoned when he returned to Tokyo. The celluloid buff started an Internet movie magazine instead.

It caught the attention of Sony bigwigs who offered him a job doing research and development for digital cinema. It was quite a feat; he was then the youngest employee working at the electronic giant's headquarters.

But it took just one year before he got restless and quit. Sony, however, persuaded him to take on a consultancy position, which he did for two years.

In 2000, he set up a media business, Cafe Groove. The outfit started out designing websites and other collateral for movie companies. It steadily grew over the next decade, branching out into other areas, including branding, movie distributorship and even a French restaurant. At its peak, the company had about 100 employees.

A documentary titled Food, Inc that Mr Hamada distributed marked a turning point in his life.

Directed by film-maker Robert Kenner, the 2008 production puts US corporate farming under the microscope, exposing unsavoury practices and the harm they wreak on humans, animals and the environment.

Japanese wagyu farmer Muneharu Ozaki contacted Mr Hamada after watching the documentary and invited him to visit his ranch.

The farmer wanted to let him know that his cattle were treated with love, and given, among other things, natural mineral water fortified with natural ingredients including barley and corn.

"Mr Ozaki also fed me 1kg of wagyu in one day. I wasn't a fan before that, I thought it was full of fat. But he had a barbecue and cooked for me. That really changed my life. It was so good," he says.

He started Viva Japan, a business unit that he set up to promote Japan and its food, art and products, including wagyu beef. People had been telling him that Japan was being surpassed on the global stage by the likes of China and South Korea and he felt he needed to do something to "revamp" the country.

In 2011, he came to Singapore, hoping to grow Viva Japan.

"I saw the future in Asia." Among other things, he organised pop-up projects promoting Japanese food in places like Ion Orchard and also set up 81 Duxton, a fine-dining and tapas restaurant.

But it closed after a year. By then, he had become fast friends with Mr Ng, who spoke fluent Japanese. They met often for drinks, and later even became flat-mates.

"On many occasions, he said he had something important to tell me but I would always say: 'I'm too drunk. Don't tell me.'"

Finally, one night over white wine at a bar in Mohamed Sultan, he found out that Mr Ng had late-stage lung cancer. Before he passed on, his friend would often share his thoughts on life. "He once said that if tomorrow were his last day, he would choose to spend it with the ones he loved and that he would do something which would benefit others, not just himself."

Around this time, Mr Hamada was going through an extremely rough patch in his life. His business in Japan was bleeding, and he was in debt to the tune of several million dollars.

"I had lost my passion and my motivation to run it. I was also going through a divorce," says Mr Hamada, who married at 27 and has two young daughters.

"I was not sure what I should do. Edwin said: 'Why don't you do food? You have a lot of passion for it, you also have your own cooking style.'"

Mr Hamada sold all his divisions except Viva Japan and told his staff that he would devote himself to selling wagyu. It seemed counter-intuitive, especially when he had lost money as a wagyu supplier in Singapore. "My vice-president who had worked for me for more than 10 years looked at me. I could tell from his eyes that he was thinking: 'Hisato has lost it. He has gone mad.' Actually almost everybody thought I was crazy."

He admits candidly that he did not have a business plan, just the notion that he wanted to be the world's biggest supplier of the creme de la creme – the top 0.01 per cent – of Kobe beef.



Mr Hamada is also the man behind the world's most expensive wagyu sandwich, priced at 50,000 yen (\$\$656). It initially saw no takers, but now counts footballer David Beckham and Twitter CEO Jack Dorsey as big fans. PHOTO: HISATO HAMADA

How he built a wagyu business



SCAN TO WATCH



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The plan also ticked several boxes in his list of requirements: it is Japanese, has product differentiation, and has a high entry barrier.

A little lesson is in order here. Wagyu comes from exclusively Japanese cattle breeds like black, brown and shorthorn. The most prized, and famous, is Kobe, from the black tajima breed of wagyu cattle raised in Hyogo Prefecture. This "caviar of meat" retails for between US\$500 (\$\$693) and US\$1,000 for each kilogram.

Mr Hamada approached Mr Shinosuke Murakami, president of S Foods Inc, which specialises in the manufacture and sale of meat products. The two were introduced by Mr Ozaki, the wagyu farmer who saw Food, Inc.

It took three months of conversation before Mr Murakami took him on as a supplier.

"I was probably the first guy who told him that there was a huge potential for kobe beef in the international market. And I told him I – and nobody else – could help him break into that market."

"It was difficult in the beginning, but slowly, I started doing a lot of exporting," adds Mr Hamada, who spent several months – in farms

and in slaughterhouses – learning all he could about the wagyu trade.

He visited hundreds of farms, and selected around 20 which met his exacting standards.

"I disrupt the middleman. I get my beef straight from the farm and sell it to the end chef, not the butcher. I sell it directly, from farm to table," he says, adding that today, he sells about 30 cows worth of beef each month.

Around this time, he reconnected with Mr Takafumi Horie, whom he knew from his tech business days. Mr Horie was a colourful tech whizz who built an Internet empire, Livedoor, from scratch and who was released from prison in March 2013 after serving about two years over a trading scandal.

"People were telling me not to hang out with him if I wanted to rebuild my company because he was an ex-convict. He wanted to cook when he got out of jail but had no place to because he was followed by the paparazzi. So he started cooking at my house," he says.

The two started hosting private dinners in Mr Hamada's home. When the opportunity to do a pop-up eatery in Kyoto came up in 2016, the duo grabbed it.

A testing ground for the Wagyumafia concept already percolating in Mr Hamada's head – a culinary DJ, doing mashups of cuisine and cooking styles – it was a resounding success.

A few months later, the duo opened their first Wagyumafia outlet – a kaiseki eatery – in Akasaka in Tokyo. Not long after the restaurant opened, the two partners placed the winning bid on the most expensive Kobe cow sold in the world then: US\$50,000 for the 685kg, 40-month-old animal.

Since then, four other Wagyumafia outlets have opened in Tokyo. These include The Cutlet Sandwich in Nakameguro, which sells his famously expensive wagyu sandwiches.

Mr Hamada came up with the idea, inspired by pork cutlet sandwiches, which are a popular street snack in Japan.

The price is astronomical because each cow, he says, yields only about six pieces of chateaubriand, the most coveted part of the tenderloin.

For a few months, the world's most expensive sandwich – initially priced at 20,000 yen – saw no takers.

"My staff were getting worried. But I told them not to change anything and that, one day, someone would buy it."

A tourist did, and not long after, Twitter's Mr Dorsey came along too and loved it. The world's priciest sandwich went viral.

A journalist from Vice magazine who tried it wrote: "It sings in your mouth with a level of umami that numbs the mind and literally made my eyes roll in opposite directions." Last year, Beckham tried it with his son Brooklyn when they were in Tokyo.

He and Mr Hamada became instant pals. The footballer even flew the latter to London to cook at director Guy Ritchie's pub Lore Of The Land to celebrate his 20th wedding anniversary with his wife Victoria last month.

Wagyumafia is now going swimmingly and has opened an outlet in Hong Kong. Annual revenue for the company is now US\$12 million.

Meanwhile, outlets in Manila, London and Singapore are on the cards for next year.

"I'm already looking at suitable venues in Orchard Road," says Mr Hamada, who also plans to open another five outlets in Tokyo.

The road he took has been rocky but Mr Hamada says he wouldn't have it any other way.

"From day one, I've always wanted to be unique and different. I don't want to do what others do. I have to justify my existence, and I don't compromise."

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