

# Transforming Local Delicacies: Retort Technology as a Catalyst for Seeni Food & Beverages Sdn Bhd's Global Reach

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## Prologue

One evening in April 2024, Hafiz and his father, Mr. Seeni, were seated at the Richiamor Cafe, enjoying their lattes and hot chocolates while contemplating their next move. "Father," Hafiz said excitedly, "As you know, we've established a strong presence in the local market since we transitioned our street food business to instant food using retort technology. Our sales have surged to RM100,000 within just a year of implementing this technology, highlighting our potential for entering the international market." Mr. Seeni expressed his agreement with the excellent idea, noting that his research indicates a rising interest in Asian cuisine within the global market, particularly among younger consumers who are becoming more open to specific dishes such as mee sotong. Nevertheless, he emphasized the necessity for developing strategies that effectively tackle the distinct challenges and opportunities associated with each segment of the international market. Hafiz added, "At present, there are no products like ours available on the international market. We must take advantage of these opportunities." His father nodded in agreement. "I believe in you, my son. To succeed, you need the strength of character to pursue your ambitions and dreams. Don't be afraid; just proceed with careful planning for the sake of our family business, which has been around since 1977."

## Early Life

Syed Muhammad Hafiz was born in 2000, from Pulau Pinang. Hafiz's passion for cooking and entrepreneurship stems from his family background. He grew up assisting his father, Seeni Mohamed, who owned a mee sotong stall in Penang, starting from the age of nine. This early exposure to the food business allowed him to develop a deep appreciation for traditional cooking methods and flavors. His father's influence played a pivotal role in shaping Hafiz's culinary skills and inspired him to create his own recipe for mee sotong.

## Education

Hafiz was a brilliant student who wanted to further study in higher education, a very great hope at that time. In 2019, his dream come true when he got an

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## KEYWORDS

Retort Technology, Innovation, Strategic Management, Entrepreneurship

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offer from University Malaysia Kelantan (UMK) Jeli Campus, pursuing a Bachelor of Applied Science specifically in Bioindustrial Technology at the Faculty of Bioengineering and Technology (FBKT). This programme provided opportunities for him to expert a wide range of science and technology knowledge. The programme also as a catalyst to enable biological resource-based industries to be fully integrated with other manufacturing industries. During his studies, he learned about various food processing methods, including retort technology, which would later become instrumental in his business success.

Hafiz started his business in 2021. In the beginning Hafiz started the business field only because he had to help his family make a living, after that it became a big career for him. At that time, he ran his business with guidance from his mentor, Dr. Syafwan. He also asked for advice from his father who is a restaurant owner.

### **Company Background**

In 1977, in the quiet town of Georgetown, Penang, Seeni Mee Sotong, began its existence. In 1995, the company evolved to offer restaurant food and beverage services after beginning as a small family-run tricycle business on the side of the road utilising traditional Indian cuisine. Over the years, it expanded its offerings to include a diverse range of dishes and beverages, including mee sotong, pasembur, ais kacang, penang sherbat, and many more. A standout creation from Seeni Mohamed, the owner, is the unique “Sambai Sotong Pedas Padu,” which features fried noodles topped with a special squid sambal.

This company received the cognition “Most Favourite Dish in Penang” in 2005 and the “Best Malaysia Food & Beverages” Malaysia Awards in 2018. Seeni Mee Sotong maintains a strong commitment to quality, ensuring that every step of their production process adheres to established standards to guarantee the safety and satisfaction of their customers.



Figure 1: Seeni Mohamed

### **Signs of Economic Uncertainty and Inspiration**

In the fall of 2019 due to Covid-19 and movement control orders, Hafiz saw lower sales than expected and affected business negatively. He is in the first year of academic season at the time-crises. Hafiz's practice of planning three to five years earlier made it difficult to alter marketing, and promotional

plans already underway especially given the uncertainty of how serious the economy's softening might be. The company struggled to establish its own niche, delivering unique and exciting products and a positive customer experience with the help of his entrepreneurship mentor, Dr. Safwan and the UMK Entrepreneurship Institute (UMKEI) who helped him register the university student company (SSU).

Hafiz come out a new idea to innovate existing product that was originally from his father, Mr. Seeni. Hafiz remembered: *"I had failed several times while running a business, but I always sought advice from Dr. Safwan, my mentor for entrepreneurship to overcome the problems. He always gave me advice not to give up easily in business because everything we do will have challenges. "A little bit becomes a hill"* is a phrase he constantly carries with him. He added, *"These phrases make me what I am today."* He also said that planning is very important in business and at least have the next five years plan.

### **Strategizing for Improvement**

Changes in the economic climate prompted Hafiz to form an innovation to closely follow the recounting situation. He took a risk on his life by founding a manufacturing company that specialized in instant noodles in a variety of flavours such as "Seeni Mee Sotong Flavored Squid Noodles", "Seeni Mee Sotong Flavored Tom Yam Noodles", and "Seeni Mee Sotong Flavored Penang Curry Noodles", where this idea originated from traditional recipes from earlier generations and observations made on current trends.

In 2020, Hafiz began developing a set of contingency plans. He and his father studied existing data and research to contemplate what effect a further downturn in sales could have, and what they might need to do to respond. They also traced Seni's selling, general and administrative expenses (SG&A) as a percentage of sales, which had sneaked in previous years. The review had identified some areas where they were engaged in activities that have significant positive impact on the business performance. *"We spent a lot of time in preparing squid noodles every day, but we found that many new customers got no chance to taste it because they are outside Penang."*

The review found that many food products had a short shelf life and had high waste levels. Therefore, he was inspired to make instant noodles because customers at that time were not able to find the food outside due to movement control orders. He remembered: *"With only my own savings and earnings from selling squid noodles on the street, entrepreneurship carnivals, business kiosks within university campuses, and business grant assistance from entrepreneurial agencies, I began developing this company."*

Another review revealed that, the higher demand for the product, but they are operating at the restaurant, with limited space and always out of stock. Hafiz drew from these findings as they planned how to increase customer's experience and costs might be cut. This idea indeed facilitates consumers as these foods no longer need to be waited for long in restaurants to enjoy them because they are very easy to prepare. Therefore, with instant products available, consumers who are far from branches no longer need to travel to taste and enjoy Seeni Mee Sotong.

## The Role of Retort Technology

Retort technology significantly impacts the production processes of mee sotong, offering numerous benefits that enhance product quality, safety, and marketability. Firstly, retort processing allows mee sotong to be shelf-stable for extended periods without refrigeration. The high heat and pressure sterilize the food, killing harmful microorganisms and inactivating enzymes that cause spoilage. This enables mee sotong to be stored at room temperature for months, greatly expanding its commercial reach.

Secondly, while high heat can degrade some nutrients, retort processing is designed to balance microbial safety with minimal impact on flavor and nutritional content. Studies have shown that retort-processed foods maintain sensory attributes like taste and texture. Thirdly, retort-packaged mee sotong is ready-to-eat straight from the pouch, requiring no further preparation. This convenience appeals to modern consumers. From a production standpoint, retort technology is more efficient than traditional cooking methods. The controlled heating and sterile packaging allow for large-scale commercial manufacturing with consistent quality.

Another benefits is cost-effectiveness. While the initial investment in retort equipment is high, the long-term cost savings make it worthwhile for large-scale mee sotong production. Reduced spoilage, extended shelf life, and streamlined manufacturing offset the equipment costs. In summary, retort processing provides the company with a safe, cost-effective, and convenient alternative to traditional cooking methods. By extending shelf life, maintaining quality, and enabling large-scale production, retort technology has opened up new market opportunities for ready-to-eat food, mee sotong.

## Success Factors

In 2021, Hafiz implemented quickly his idea. At the beginning, he started his own business by registering Syarikat Siswa Universiti (SSU) business company under the Universiti Malaysia Kelantan Entrepreneurship Institute (UMKEI) with the help of his mentor, Dr. Safwan. The name of the company is Seeni Food & Beverages Sdn Bhd. Among the factors that led to the creation of Hafiz's business was his father, Seeni Mohamed. His father gave a lot of support and encouragement to him to expand his ambition to become a successful young entrepreneur. Support from these two important people made it possible for him to launch a business while he was still a student. Hafiz believed in the power of mentorship to unlock the full potential of his business. He recalled: *"Witnessing the hardships my father faced to support our family inspired me to change our family's fortunes by transforming our street food business to instant food business using retort technology. This innovation allows me to introduce the specialties of Pulau Mutiara (Pearl Island) for customers to enjoy without the need to travel to Penang."*

Hafiz's business experienced significant growth after he incorporated some innovations retort food packaging technology, which significantly enhanced the product's shelf life and marketability into his production of mee sotong. He said, *"The knowledge I gained at UMK and my father's recipe enabled me to transform the mee sotong into 'retort' food, resulting in extraordinary demand."* In the late 2021s, Hafiz began to cooperate with various local and international agencies. With his efforts and

determination, the factory is now able to produce 10,000 units per day and now has a total of 35 employees.

Furthermore, the introduction of retort technology also allowed him to package the dish in a way that made it shelf-stable and ready-to-eat directly from the packaging. This was crucial for meeting consumer demands for convenience and safety, leading to a substantial increase in sales. In addition to that, retort processing employs heat and pressure to sterilize food, effectively extending its shelf life while preserving flavor and nutritional content. The use of retort technology not only improved the product's safety by eliminating harmful microorganisms but also maintained its taste and texture.

As a result, his sales exceeded RM100,000 within a year of implementing this technology during the economic boom years in 2023. His success stories were covered in almost all newspapers. Hafiz has received recognition for his innovative approach to food processing through retort technology. His entrepreneurial journey reflects how traditional recipes can be modernized to meet contemporary consumer needs while preserving cultural heritage.

Hafiz commented, *"It's a new strategy; it's just reweighting our overall business model. I never expected this business model to receive tremendous support from customers. Originally frying noodles in a pan, I successfully introduced instant squid noodles using retort technology."*

### **Future Aspirations**

Over time, Hafiz developed a benchmarking strategy to ensure that its products would be only one or two above similar products within the same geographic market. However, Hafiz's upscale products provided differentiation from its competitors. He was inspired to produce squid-flavored instant noodles by using retort technology which can extend the life of food without using any chemical ingredients. Because this product has never been released by any company, it has received a warm response and is a bestseller in the domestic markets. The combination of traditional culinary skills and modern processing methods has positioned his products favorably for international consumers seeking convenient and high-quality ready-to-eat meals. With the success of his mee sotong, Hafiz aims expand his business internationally, targeting markets in South Korea, Singapore, Hong Kong, China, Macau, and the UAE. The ability to produce a high-quality, shelf-stable product has positioned him well for this expansion.



Figure 2: Syed Muhammad Hafiz and his products

## Epilogue

Hafiz believed that innovation through retort technology was essential for generating profit and sustaining his family business. As a result, he planned to export his products to international markets following their impressive performance. However, entering these markets posed various challenges that would require careful planning, adaptation, and strategic execution to navigate successfully. Effectively addressing these issues would be vital for his success on a global scale. Hafiz brought this matter up with his father, saying, *“Father, I’ve decided to expand our business into international markets. However, I’m unsure about the demand and whether we can achieve profitability in this venture.”* Now, Hafiz faced the critical decision of taking a significant step toward entering international markets.

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