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## Asian food firm dreams of creating 'mini-Chinatown' in Glasgow



SeeWoo managing director Lucy Tse-Mitchell

THE boss of an Asian food retail, distribution, wholesale and manufacturing **business** has spoken of her dream to create a “mini Chinatown” in Glasgow as it relaunched a supermarket that it recently brought back into the fold.

SeeWoo Group officially reopened what is understood to be Scotland’s largest Asian supermarket on Glasgow’s Saracen Street on Thursday following a “significant investment”. The company bought the store back in December after a four-year period under different ownership, having originally launched the site in 2006.

The acquisition safeguarded the jobs of 28 people, and SeeWoo plans to add at least 10 more to the headcount over the next 18 months.

Managing director Lucy Tse-Mitchell, whose late father Stanley set up family-owned SeeWoo Group in 1975, said it was “completely by chance” that the opportunity to buy the Glasgow store came up again.

“We know the business and we know the site,” she told The Herald. “We have big visions for what we can think we can do with the site. It was too good an opportunity to miss.”

She added: “We wanted to have coverage up in **Scotland** so that we could service the Scottish market, and Glasgow specifically because we see that as a really exciting emerging foodie market. Also, because we want to import into Scotland as well. We do a lot of import and distribution – I would say approximately 40 per cent of our product lines come from overseas, so it gives us another port to import into as well.”

Speaking shortly before the outlet’s formal reopening, which featured a traditional lion dance ceremony (the store even has own lion, Jade, meaning good luck and strength), Ms Tse-Mitchell said the supermarket offers a “really broad range of south-east Asian food”, including exotic fruit and vegetables. It will also sell the company’s own range of vegan rice, which it manufactures itself and is “becoming really popular”.

“South-east Asian cuisine generally lends itself well to vegetarianism and veganism, which is a very big, growing market in the UK,” Ms Tse-Mitchell said. “Globally, there is a definite shift to more plant-based, even if not totally vegan [food]. We have a great selection of vegetarian and vegan products; also bubble tea and mochi, the little Japanese cakes.

“We are going to be bringing a whole lot of new products and exciting food drinks which we are seeing emerging in Chinatown down in London, which has changed significantly over the last 10 years. And I think Glasgow is just, for me, a really great foodie destination. We see that as such an emerging market – I think it’s about to really happen.”

Asked if the company would consider further store openings in Glasgow, Ms Tse-Mitchell replied: “Quite possibly. Glasgow and the whole of Scotland is an interesting new market for us. We are seeing so many more new foodservice customers coming all the time as well because of our modern set-up. They are looking for all the authentic products but they want it in a modern way. We have definitely got quite aggressive growth plans after this year of consolidation which we have coming up. It is a time for everyone to emerge from the pandemic, consolidate and strengthen their businesses.”

She added: “I am personally hugely excited about Glasgow.”

There also plans to turn SeeWoo Glasgow into a dining destination. Ms Tse-Mitchell said talks were ongoing with potential partners over two restaurants that the company hopes to open at the site. The shop was formerly home to the largest restaurant in Scotland, before it closed three years ago. “We are going to be having a couple of restaurant partners taking on that space and they will be opening the doors within this year,” she said. “We’re in the final **stage** of discussions with two restaurant partners.”

“We’re looking to kind of create a mini-Chinatown in Glasgow,” she added.

The Glasgow store is one element of a much broader **food and drink** empire that falls under the SeeWoo Group. The company imports, distributes, retails and manufactures Oriental foods through a variety of subsidiaries, including a supermarket in London’s Chinatown, turning over in excess of £20 million with 126 employees

Ms Tse-Mitchell said it has been a tough time for the group's customers in the restaurant trade amid the chopping and changing of restrictions as the pandemic has progressed, though believes there has been evidence of recovery in the last couple of months, which she hopes will be sustained.

While the hospitality trade has received some government grants and business rates relief throughout the crisis, she pointed out that support for wholesalers such as SeeWoo had “fallen through the cracks”. “It hasn’t been easy to obtain any support, yet overnight we have seen our sales significantly impacted,” she said.



Moreover, the company has not been immune to the global supply chain challenges that have arisen since economies around the **world** reopened after lockdown. The rising cost of shipping remains an acute concern, while factories it imports from in the Far East have been hit by staff shortages because of Covid.

“We have seen an enormous increase in our import costs – over 700%,” Ms Tse-Mitchell said. “Pre-pandemic, it would cost on average \$2,000 to bring in a 40-foot container. Now it’s over \$17,000. It’s incredible really. We have been looking for that to stabilise in the last year and it really hasn’t.”

Such upheaval is part of the reason SeeWoo has returned to Glasgow. “If we can start diverting some of our imports to Glasgow, and spread them between the different ports in the UK we currently import into, that will really help too,” Ms Tse-Mitchell said.

She added: “We are trying to also manufacture a lot more in the UK. We do have a factory [in Parkwell, London]. That’s a good thing, I think, for sustainability. We are striving much more for locally sourced, locally produced [products] wherever we can.”

### Six Questions

What countries have you most enjoyed travelling to, for business or leisure, and why?

I spent time in Australia and New Zealand as a teenager, which I thoroughly enjoyed, I also went to Bangkok in Thailand on a business trip and loved the buzz and warmth of the city.

When you were a child, what was your ideal job? Why did it appeal?

I think I used to play schools the most. I’m quite bossy and organised and thought I would be good at it.

What was your biggest break in business?

Acquiring the SeeWoo Glasgow site – I was so excited for its potential.

What was your worst moment in business?

The pandemic.

Who do you most admire and why?

My father, who died recently. He was one of the pioneers and founding fathers of the Chinese food sector in the UK and a respected community leader. He came to the UK at the age of 17 from Hong Kong, starting as a restaurant kitchen porter and then sous chef.

He went on to own several restaurants and then formed SeeWoo Group, which became the leading importer, distributor, wholesaler, retailer and manufacturer of East and South-east Asian foods.

I am proud of his extraordinary business achievements and the influence he had in the growth of this sector, but also of his philanthropic contributions. The messages of condolence we have received have been overwhelming, three words are omnipresent: warm, generous and charming.

What book are you reading and what music are you listening to?

Abba, because it's the sound of my childhood. I also love a lot of 80s and 90s – I was a big Wham! and Spandau Ballet fan. I also really like The Killers.

I'm reading The Island Of Missing Trees by Elif Shafak.