

Building a Sustainable Asean

In partnership with 

Local indoor farming start-up wants to boost the Republic's food resilience with homegrown greens

He sows the seeds for S'pore's food needs



Sustenir chief executive officer Jack Moy says his role encompasses three aspects: To run a company, represent the local farming industry, and inspire consumers to eat healthy. PHOTO: LIANHE ZHAOBAO

By FENG ZENGKUN

He knew that moving from a well-established multinational company to a young urban farming start-up was a "high-risk career move".

Mr Jack Moy, then aged 30, had no knowledge of agriculture technology. He would also have to take a 20 per cent pay cut.

Yet in 2017, the former Unilever e-commerce manager decided to cultivate a new career path, joining local start-up Sustenir as a sales manager.

Mr Moy's motivation? A burning desire to be "part of building something bigger".

"I saw a start-up with big potential to have a strong positive impact in Singapore, and in other cities," says Mr Moy, 37, who envisioned developing and expanding the brand into the retail sector.

Founded in 2013, Sustenir grows fresh produce – such as microgreens, edible flowers and leafy vegetables – within an indoor hydroponics farm in Sembawang. Compared with traditional farms, Sustenir can grow greens faster, at a fraction of the space required.

"The technology was there, but (from a) sales distribution perspective, there was nothing," he says. "We wanted to have that direct engagement with consumers, enabling us to learn more about what they thought of our produce."

With Mr Moy's efforts, the company's client base has expanded from a few eateries and restaurants such as The Soup Spoon and Ikea, to supermarket chains including Cold Storage and FairPrice, and online retailers such as RedMart.

He has also climbed the ranks within the firm, to general manager in 2018, chief operating officer in early 2021, and finally chief executive officer later that year.

Sustenir now supplies more than three tonnes of spinach, kale, arugula and other salad greens and mixes

weekly, the equivalent of over 25,000 servings of vegetables.

Its 2,200 sq m farm – nearly the size of two Olympic pools – covers three levels in a commercial building, with the largest site spanning 1,600 sq m.

For comparison, an average vegetable farm in Singapore spans 2ha (20,000 sq m) of land, and produces 130 tonnes of vegetables per hectare annually, according to the Singapore Food Agency (SFA). Its 2023 Singapore Food Statistics report states that there are 115 licensed vegetable food farms in Singapore.

Sustenir has also diversified into manufacturing bottled smoothies, and partnered with other food firms to make ready-to-eat packaged meals.

While Singapore's nascent agri-

tech farming industry faces headwinds from rising energy costs, falling private investment and other issues, Sustenir is standing firm.

Under his leadership, Sustenir's revenue has increased fivefold over the past five years, and became B Corporation certified in 2022.

Developed by US-based non-profit organisation B Lab, the globally recognised certification is for companies that meet high standards of social and environmental impact. Companies must submit data every three years to be recertified.

By continuing to grow, Sustenir hopes it "can change the sector's momentum and show it's possible for high-tech farms to thrive," says Mr Moy.

Over the years, Sustenir has also focused on growing more nutritionally-dense vegetables. Its latest innovation is 'Kalming Kale', grown from specific seeds and with a proprietary blend of nutrients to contain more gamma-aminobutyric acid, believed to have a calming effect.

"We're not just concentrating on producing nutritious vegetables," says Mr Moy. "We want our greens to have benefits that target the problems that many city dwellers have, such as sleeplessness, stress, and gut issues from eating too little dietary fibre or too much processed food."

By modifying its 'growth recipes', which cover seed selection, growing conditions, nutrient input and more, Mr Moy says that Sustenir has been able to produce vegetables that are more palatable, such as kale that is softer and less bitter.

Mr Moy adds that the firm invests about \$200,000 on research and development (R&D) annually. It tests the fruits of its R&D at farmers' markets and during tours of its farm, among other avenues.

With positive feedback from consumers, Sustenir's next product, to be rolled out next month, will be a colourful rainbow chard.

"We hope that 'eating a rainbow' will be a hit with both adults and kids, and encourage children to develop the habit of eating more greens," says

To sustain, stabilise the chain

For Mr Moy, supply chain disruptions brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic underlined the importance for Singapore to grow more of its own food.

In 2020, Sustenir stepped forward to boost the Republic's local produce. It created a 1,600 sq m farm, now part of its operations, to deliver 100 tonnes of vegetables annually.

Now, amid geopolitical tensions, 90 per cent of businesses across Asean and Greater China believe in the importance of supply chain management, notes UOB's Business Outlook study 2024.

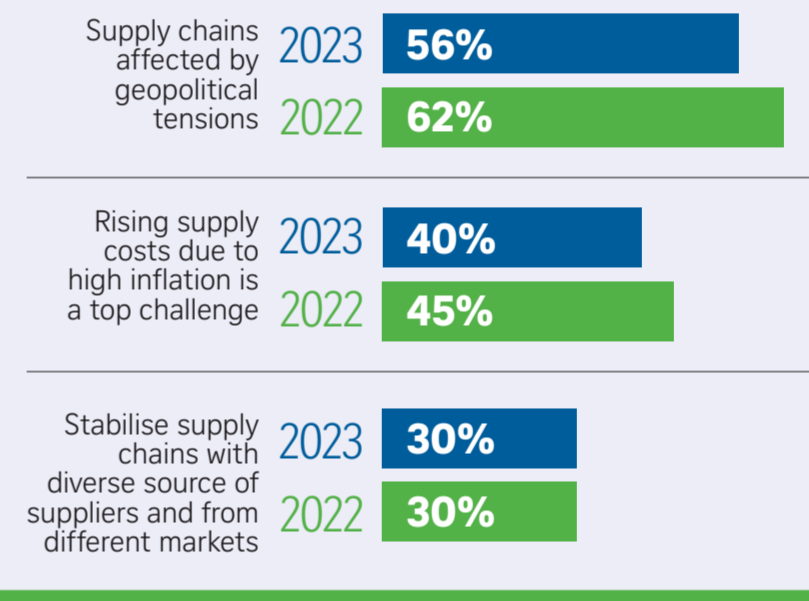
Conducted from December to January, the study surveyed over 4,000 business owners and executives from small to large enterprises in seven regional markets.

Ms Kavita Bedi, head of Group Business Banking, UOB, shares how the bank connects businesses across supply chains and sectors, with its regional footprint, sector expertise and local market knowledge.

This helps businesses to "navigate market complexities and seize growth opportunities" locally and regionally, she says.

"Through us, companies big and small can find the right partners, explore new frontiers of trade, and expand seamlessly into new markets."

What else do businesses say about supply chain management? Findings from the study include:



Mr Moy, who is married with a four-year daughter.

Seeds for impact

As Sustenir continues to grow, it is giving back to society. It has worked with disability agency SG Enable since 2021 to hire people with disabilities, who now make up about 5 per cent of its 70 employees.

Additionally, Mr Moy chairs the technical committee of the Institute of Technical Education's work-study diploma programme in agriculture and aquaculture, providing students with hands-on experience, technical knowledge, and internship opportunities.

Mr Moy also co-chaired the industry-led Alliance for Action (AFA) on Local Produce Demand Offtake and Consumer Education, which was formed last February.

To encourage food businesses and consumers to buy more local produce, the AFA introduced a Farm-to-Table Recognition Programme – a three-tier award initiative recognising restaurants that procure at least 15 per cent of their fresh produce from local farms.

"Buying local means you get the freshest and highest quality food," says Mr Moy, explaining how imported produce loses its nutrients in trans-

port, and has a higher carbon footprint.

While Sustenir's produce is priced roughly 15 per cent higher than imports, "what differentiates us is not only being fresher and more nutritious, but growing produce sustainably".

Mr Moy's vision: A Singapore that is not only a city in a garden, but a city in a high-tech food garden.

"I'm excited to go to work every day because I can say with my heart on my heart that what I'm doing is meaningful and helping people to become healthier."

"Growing more with less, inspiring people to take care of their health – these are the reasons we want to become a local farming champion."

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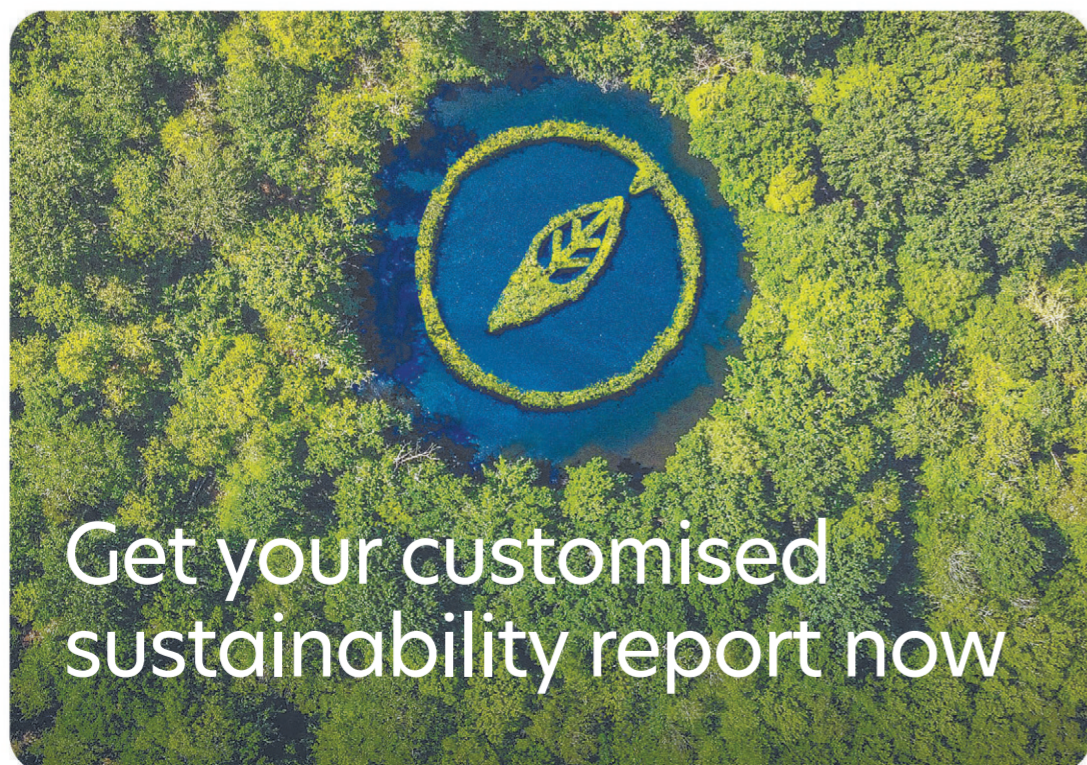
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“Growing more with less, inspiring people to take care of their health – these are the reasons we want to become a local farming champion.”

— Mr Jack Moy, chief executive officer of Sustenir



Sustenir first started with kale, a nutrient-dense vegetable that is challenging to grow in a local outdoor environment. PHOTO: SUSTENIR



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