

Restaurateur Andrew Tjioe is set to open his 21st restaurant on Monday. He tells KAREN CHO how the style and personalities of his restaurants are vital to the success of the Tung Lok group.

## Feeding the senses

When the curtains are raised on Imperium, a new restaurant of the Tung Lok group on Monday, its creator Mr Andrew Tjioe, won't be waiting to hear how much customers are lapping up his food.

"We're in the creative business," declared the president and CEO of the Tung Lok Group. "It's a show business. If you put up a good show, people will always be there."

Imperium is a restaurant and an entertainment centre rolled into one. With a capacity of 650, it is Mr Tjioe's most ambitious and challenging project to date in the Tung Lok's string of 20 restaurants.

It is surrounded by good restaurants in Ngee Ann City, he said. That suits him fine as he likes "to be around strong competitors".

"You have to be good all the time," he added. "Rejuvenate,

or be kicked out."

Reinvention is the key to Tung Lok's success. Mr Tjioe makes it a point to not only hire the right people, but also keep them.

For instance, Imperium's kitchen will be led by veteran chef Daniel Koh, the man behind Intermezzo restaurant, and Concorde Hotel's Xin Cuisine.

Another star, Mr Sam Leong of Jade restaurant at The Fullerton Hotel, is a two-time winner of the Best Asian Ethnic Chef in the World Gourmet Summit Award of Excellence 2001 and 2002. Food consultant Susur Lee also flies down regularly from Canada to show off his creations.

Said Mr Tjioe: "Tung Lok is like a big tree that attracts many 'birds'. The challenge is providing them with a platform to realise their potential."

People are vital in the creation of an authentic dining experience, especially in concept restaurants like Lao Beijing and House of Mao Hunan Hot Pot. Both have strong Chinese themes.

For Lao Beijing, he preferred to hire Northern Chinese from Beijing as restaurant managers. Thus, all staff members at this restaurant are trained to shout out greetings to customers when they enter or leave. The idea is to recreate the ambience of a "boisterous" Beijing teahouse.

However, due to labour restrictions, Tung Lok cannot hire more than four or five Chinese nationals per restaurant.

In addition, Mr Tjioe believes in cultivating loyalty. For example, there are awards like The Restaurant of the Year award, a five-figure award shared among the staff mem-

bers of the winning restaurant. The winner of the Chairman's Award gets a holiday worth up to \$1,000 and three additional days of vacation leave.

Another visible factor in the success of the Tung Lok group is style.

The new business philosophy for Mr Tjioe is that dining is not limited to what is on a plate. It is also about style.

"If you talk to sophisticated diners, they very seldom say how good the food is. They'd rather say something like 'I had a very good experience at this restaurant.'"

An example is the breathtaking and stylised treat Chef Zhang Jin Jie created at the Asian Restaurant and Bar for four days. According to Mr Tjioe, she used angel's breath to decorate the lights and then lined the table full of rose petals. And she never used the same plate for each course.



**Man at work:** Mr Tjioe goes over the plans for the opening of his new restaurant, Imperium.

Chef Zhang is chef-cum-owner of Green Tea House in Beijing. She designs her own furniture, writes the menu in the scroll and pens your name on a ginkgo leaf if you make reservations.

The 32-year-old Chinese

chef is "stylish and inspiring", said Mr Tjioe.

She has agreed to create something together with Tung Lok, he said. And, they will both be busy staging another show to the delight of all food lovers in Singapore.