

Company : Chatime – Will Group
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 Subject : **Chatime plans 'return' to Malaysia with new partner Will Group**
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KUALA LUMPUR: It is a brand almost synonymous with bubble tea in Malaysia - but from more than 160 outlets, there are only four Chatime stores left in the country after a fallout between the franchise owner, La Kaffa and former master franchisee, Loob Holding.

Channel NewsAsia can exclusively reveal the Taiwanese tea house is back with a new partner - Will Group - who plans on expanding to 70 outlets after a year and bringing Chatime back to its "glory days".

Will Group had been running two of the most profitable Chatime outlets in Malaysia - in KL Sentral and Genting Highlands - when it was asked by La Kaffa to take over as master franchisee from Loob Holding. La Kaffa terminated its agreement with Loob in January, accusing the company of using unapproved products and of owing them money.

Loob has denied these allegations, launching its own Tealive brand - which it said is now carried by 161 former Chatime outlets.

For 32-year-old Managing Director Aliza Ali and executive director Widayu A Latiff, 38, expanding Chatime is a challenge they are excited about.

"Our short term goal is to open 30 stores within the next six months ... we're looking at expanding the outlets that are most frequently visited by the customers," Aliza told Channel NewsAsia.

"The long term goal is by the end of the 12th month, to open 70 outlets. So we're working really hard on that."

Aliza said Chatime has a customer base built up over five years in Malaysia who are eagerly awaiting the brand's "return". Part of this process includes reviving and improving working relationships with sub-franchisees and partners as well as a return to "quality" La Kaffa-approved ingredients.

"Not to compare with (Loob), I guess we have different business styles ... what we are really looking at is to that ensure every outlet we open is a good investment, good quality outlet," she said.

Will Group is currently the master licensor for Chatime but the legal process is underway for it to officially take over as master franchisee.

Meanwhile, former master franchisee Loob plans to increase the number of Tealive outlets "from 165 to 250 in Malaysia by 2018 as well as (its) customer base from 2.5 million a month to five million."

Aliza is unfazed - viewing Tealive as just another competitor.