

**OPENING REMARKS BY DR KOH POH KOON, SENIOR
MINISTER OF STATE, MINISTRY OF NATIONAL
DEVELOPMENT AND MINISTRY OF TRADE & INDUSTRY AT
AVA'S FOOD SAFETY AWARDS NIGHT ON 7 JULY 2017**

Mr Lim Neo Chian
Chairman, Agri-Food & Veterinary Authority (AVA)

Colleagues from AVA

Distinguished guests

Ladies and gentlemen

It is always a pleasure to be here at the AVA's Food Safety

Awards Night. This is an evening to recognise excellence and
all our award recipients deserve hearty congratulations. This is

a celebratory occasion, but these awards are not frivolous, as

safety is an important aspect of the industry as it concerns all of

us. Food safety is all about public health as well. That most of us

do not worry about the food we eat is testament to the efforts of

AVA, and of our food companies, manufacturers and producers.

This is a combined effort to keep our food safe. I thank you all for that.

2 This evening's celebration is also a chance for us to take stock and look at the challenges and opportunities that we face together, as a country and an industry. In our fast-paced globalized world, innovation and disruption is here to stay and these are inevitable trends globally. So it stands to reason that the future of our food manufacturing industry will also be different from what it is today. For instance, consumer behaviour has changed with many people today purchasing groceries and prepared food online. This is delivered to their doorsteps. The food we produce is also changing. We are seeing more niche and novel foods entering the market. Examples include acai berries from South America and maca root from Peru, which are touted as superfoods that bring health benefits. This is a reflection of the increasing sophisticated tastes of our consumers, spending power of a rising middle class, a more sophisticated citizenry and people who want to have better food

for better health as well. The method of production is changing, tastes are changing, consumer patterns, behaviour and business models are changing.

3 But there are always opportunities in the midst of change.

The Chinese term for *crisis* is “危机”. The first word “危” denotes *danger*, which is to be expected in a crisis; but the second word “机” denotes *opportunity*. So in a crisis, one must not just be fixated on the danger and the risk only, and missed out on the opportunities that it offers! Singapore food producers and manufacturers are in a good position to capitalise on these opportunities. We have certain distinct advantages. First,

Singapore products are trusted internationally due to our robust food safety framework. For example, *bak kwa* from Bee Cheng

Hiang managed to enter a highly regulated market like Japan due to the high standards in food safety. Second, we are a logistics hub with excellent cold chain infrastructure. In fact, about 20% of the global trade in agri-related commodities passes through Singapore in one form or another.

4 To take advantage of these opportunities that changes and disruptions present to us, we will need to change our mindsets. Our local food industry - 90% of which tends to service our domestic market - needs to innovate and think larger. Ambitions can extend to the region if not even further! Our regulators also need to adjust and keep pace. They must become aware of new trends, new tastes, and be open to new products entering our market. They need to champion the industry and help it become more competitive, to capitalise on the advantage in our hinterland. But they have to do this while still maintaining stringent standards for food safety, because the equity of the Singapore brand is premised on food safety. This is no easy task for any of us. It takes all of us working together to make this successful.

5 To start, I urge the industry to do more to embrace technology. Singapore will always be constrained by limited land and limited manpower. Technology is an enabler to help us overcome these challenges.

6 There are technologies out there that can help us scale up, to tap into larger markets. For instance, we can automate processes by using machinery, robotics and computerised manufacturing systems. There is an initial cost, but the long term benefit is increased productivity and longer term cost savings, at the same time, reduced manpower requirements. Jobs can then be redesigned for locals to undertake higher value-added work like systems engineering, product development, and quality assurance. Technology also helps us produce safer food. One example is Foodgnostic Pte Ltd, which produces bakery and confectionery products. They invested in an ultrasonic automated cake cutter which reduces the need for human touches and the associated contamination risks, enhancing the safety of their food products.

7 As I said before, this is a combined effort which requires the industry and regulators working hand in hand. The Government must play its part. On a macro level, we have the Food

Manufacturing Industry Transformation Map which has initiatives to spur innovation, enhance productivity, improve jobs and skills, and promote internationalisation. On a more micro level, we are looking at the regulatory environment to better encourage and support innovation.

8 First, we will move the regulatory process upstream. Previously, AVA came in to approve new products just before launch. As extensive efforts in product development had already taken place, problems detected at this stage meant that efforts could be put to waste. AVA will now work with you at the early stages of development to co-create solutions, while ensuring product development meets safety standards. AVA has reviewed its regulatory process to allow companies to testbed new technology within a defined space and duration. This creates a safe environment for companies to experiment and innovate, and for the regulators to pick up any issues for rectification at an early stage.

9 One concrete example is AVA's work with The Soup Spoon. The Soup Spoon uses High Pressure Processing (HPP) equipment to kill food-borne pathogens. This system uses ultra-high pressure as opposed to high heat to kill germs. This allows food products to stay fresh longer without preservatives and additives, while retaining certain heat-sensitive vitamins. Current regulations do not allow companies to share the use of such equipment. However, as HPP is an expensive technology, AVA is test-bedding a new project to see how other companies could use this equipment on a pay-per-use basis. If it works, it would be win-win. The Soup Spoon can better amortize the cost of its equipment. Other companies can produce safer food and reduce wastage and capital outlay. And we even foresee export opportunities due to the extended shelf life of the products.

10 Second, we will provide more support for unique, novel food products. We are already seeing innovations like laboratory-grown meat and nanotech food modifiers. We understand that

companies need greater clarity on the approval processes for such products. So AVA is looking at developing a new regulatory framework. It plans to co-develop this with you so please look out for upcoming consultations and focus group discussions. AVA is also partnering with our research institutes, institutes of higher learning, and the industry to enhance its technical capabilities. This will help AVA better assess the safety of new foods and thus facilitate the launch of new products.

11 I hope that we can all continue to work together to advance our local food industry.

12 Let me end by extending my congratulations to the 170 companies that will be receiving the Food Safety Excellence awards. This includes 4 Platinum, 6 Gold, 6 Silver, and 6 Bronze award recipients, as well as 148 recipients of the Certificate of Commendation. Food Safety is such an important area. Singapore would not have such a good food safety

reputation without the strong support and efforts of all of you
here tonight.

Thank you and please enjoy the rest of the evening.

* * * * *

National Archives of Singapore