

Robinsons' fancy new home

Besides going luxe with its flagship store, Robinsons Orchard has also added edgy labels to its stable



Natasha Ann Zachariah

With its classical facade, a revolving door and a 25m-tall skylight atrium filled with cascading lights, the building at 260 Orchard Road has a decidedly upmarket feel.

Across the six levels, floors are covered in luxe materials such as marble, walls are painted in punchy colours and the roomy interiors boast a chic, modern vibe.

Once a trendy haunt for the young known as The Heeren, the building is now home to the 186,000 sq ft flagship of department store Robinsons. It will move out of The Centrepoint next year, after 31 years, when its lease is up.

Called Robinsons Orchard, the new \$40-million store opened yesterday.

It offers 380 new brands, of which more than 280 are exclusive to this store. New-to-market labels include cult British beauty brand Illamasqua and Tory Burch Beauty, which will be available in March; and Les Benjamin, an Istanbul-based label that designs only T-shirts with graphic prints and slogans.

Other luxury labels include The Kooples from France; Italian women's footwear label Sergio Rossi; and a collection from British fashion label Alice by Temperley whose fans include the Duchess of Cambridge.

There is also a vintage accessories section, where fashion items that are at least 10 years old, such as a Hermes Birkin bag and Christian Lacroix earrings, are sold.

Shoppers can cool their heels at a pop-

up champagne bar on Level 2 and sip on Moët & Chandon bubbly from \$12 a glass.

With glitzy new malls springing up in Orchard Road in recent years, the new look and expanded list of luxury brands are necessary to keep up with shoppers' evolving tastes.

Mr Franz Kraatz, 49, managing director of Robinsons Singapore, says: "Singapore's consumers have become more sophisticated and well-travelled over the years. They have been to big department stores from London to Hong Kong. And these big stores have upped their game. We are one of the oldest department stores in the world but we can't remain the same. We need to be in tune with what the customers want."

Opened in 1858 in Commercial Square, known today as Raffles Place, Robinsons started out selling wholesale imported food items and clothes from Europe.

Originally known as Spicer and Robinson, it was set up by English merchant Philip Robinson and James Gaborian Spicer, a former keeper of the Singapore jail and a partner in a shipbuilding company.

It soon garnered a reputation for quality products.

The store changed locations a couple of times after, eventually settling at Raffles Chambers in November 1941, where services included a cafe, and men and women's hairdressing.

A fire in 1972 destroyed the building and the store moved to Specialists' Shopping Centre in Orchard Road, before hopping across to The Centrepoint in 1983.

It opened another store at Raffles City in 2001 and unveiled its first suburban outlet at Jem in Jurong East in June.

Its opened an upscale 30,000 sq ft outlet in The Shoppes at Marina Bay Sands in 2011, but closed it in May this year.

Mr Kraatz told The Straits Times Urban in June that the space was not big enough as "customers expect a full-fledged department store which sells everything when they step into Robinsons".

As a testament to the strong attachment that Singaporeans feel for the grand dame of Orchard Road, many shoppers were out-

raged when its owners, which included OCBC Bank and insurance affiliate Great Eastern Holdings, put up the entire retail operations for sale in 2003. About 2,500 people signed a petition in a bid to stop the sale of the home-grown department store to foreign owners.

The sale was shelved due to the lack of a suitable buyer, but in 2008, it was sold for \$600 million to the UAE-based Al-Futtaim Group. The conglomerate owns a range of businesses including automotive, electronics, insurance and real estate companies.

Robinsons' regular sales, once a big selling point, became its undoing.

In a candid 2005 interview with The Straits Times, former chief executive John Cheston, who came on board in January that year, said customers saw the department store as being "c**p, old-fashioned, for aunties and uncles".

It was then derisively dubbed the "Mustafa of Orchard Road" for its frequent warehouse sales.

He scaled down the sales and spent \$7 million revamping the Centrepoint outlet.

His efforts paid off. When Mr Cheston joined, the group's net profit in the second half of 2004 was \$14.4 million. Three years later, it posted earnings of \$22.2 million in the second half of 2007, shortly before it was delisted in June 2008.

With the new Orchard store, Robinsons is ready for a fresh chapter.

Gone are the cramped beauty counters, racks of clothes packed in closed quarters and boring mannequins. Instead, the store is brighter, roomier and more edgy.

Home-grown interior design firm designphase dba, which helmed the project, opted for a soft palette of woody hues, with pops of bright yellow and red.

The flooring is different on every level, from marble to timber to geometric tiles, while creative props such as cabinets, industrial lights and moosehead fixtures add a quirky touch.

designphase dba's design director Joris Angevaere says: "We didn't approach it as a typical department store but as a large lifestyle boutique. All the departments that

Robinsons had previously are still here, but they are more interconnected."

For example, the two floors of womenswear and accessories on Levels 2 and 3 are designed such that shoppers can check out all the labels on offer. At the men's department on Level 4, most products such as shoes, shirts and grooming items are displayed by categories instead of brands, so they can see all the options at one go.

Level 5 sells beds, bath accessories, furniture and lighting. There will be an upcoming section for children's clothes and toys.

The basement, which sells food products and kitchen accessories, takes on a high-end marketplace vibe, with "stall concepts" for chocolates and wine sold by Le Chocolatier and Little Provence respectively.

The store was designed to be on a par with upmarket department stores such as Colette from Paris and Selfridges from London, says Mr Angevaere.

But Mr Kraatz is not worried about alienating Robinsons' older, loyal customers with its new fancy labels. "We have kept all the brands that we had previously. As our space here is very big, we have added on to our stable of brands. We are very proud of who our customers are, but we are eager to

offer some newness as well."

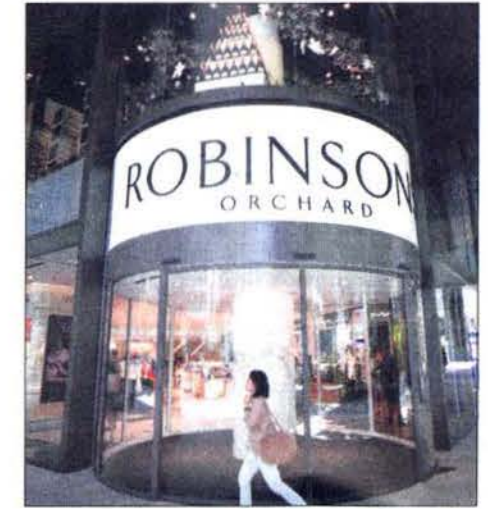
Associate professor of marketing education Seshan Ramaswami, who is from the Singapore Management University's Lee Kong Chian School of Business, says the Robinsons makeover "is long overdue".

"The Orchard Road belt has seen several new additions, in terms of malls as well as high-profile foreign fashion retailers, in the last few years.

"The recent launch of new malls in various suburbs of Singapore, such as nex in Serangoon Central and Jem in Jurong East, also means that older residential heartland consumers do not need to visit Orchard Road anymore for their shopping," he says.

"In Orchard Road, the makeover had to be upscale rather than downscale. I think current customers will appreciate the new vibe... and it might bring back customers who had abandoned the retailer for more glamorous offerings elsewhere or for the convenience of the ne...ighbourhood malls."

Dr Lynda Wee, an adjunct associate professor from the marketing and international business department at Nanyang Business School, says the store is on the right track with its new offerings.



"Shoppers do not stay the same. As they achieve affluence, their buying preferences change. Department stores need to change accordingly or be left behind," she says. "Robinsons can offer hip designer brands for the young as well as cater to quality, classic imported brands for the missus."

Shopper Jade Lee, 39, could not contain her excitement when she checked out Robinsons Orchard yesterday when it opened officially at 10.30am. The housewife rang up a \$500 bill for a dress, shoes and a necklace.

Getting her picture taken at the front entrance, she says: "The decor is so unique and the store feels high class. I love that it brought in new brands. I will be back."

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