

"It is looking good. We expect Christmas this year to be a bit better than last year's."

Tan Dawn Wei
Shuli Sudderuddin

Last year was a frosty season for retailers, but it is beginning to look like there are green shoots this Christmas.

Earlier restaurant bookings this year are a possible sign of pent-up Yuletide demand.

Other retailers and party planners are also gearing up for this important sale period.

Some have spent the slower months renovating their store fronts in time for next month, while others are planning to roll out promotions and earlier sales to hook shoppers.

Takings traditionally go up by 20 per cent during the year-end season.

"Last year was eerily quiet. Many companies had budget cuts, but that's not happening this year," said Mr Willin Low, who runs the Wild Rocket Group. It operates restaurants Wild Rocket and Relish, as well as Wild Oats bar.

He said that last year, companies scaled down their parties. But anticipating a pick-up this year, he has spent \$170,000 renovating the Wild Rocket restaurant.

Mr Martin Bem, managing director of German bar and restaurant Brotzeit, is equally optimistic this year. He will open a third outlet just before Christmas in 313@Somerset.

Mr Raymond Lim, spokesman for the Les Amis group of restaurants, said: "I'm cautiously optimistic that this Christmas might be better."

The exuberant mood now is "because of the rally in the stock market," he said, adding that people will want a good time.

His group has secured some big corporate gift orders from companies such as United Overseas Bank, a

sign of better times, he added.

As for hotels, bookings and inquiries have streamed in, although the bulk of such bookings will come two to three weeks before Christmas.

Mr Thierry Douin, vice-president and general manager of Shangri-La Hotel, is reining in his expectations for now. He said companies were still scaling back their budgets because of the current economic uncertainty.

Still, the hotel is promoting special festive deals. But not all retailers are taking the discount route. Home-grown streetwear company, 77th Street, has introduced a new range of accessories, Gothic Princess, in anticipation of year-end buying.

"We believe that diversification and expansion are the key to riding out these challenging times," said Ms Elm Chew, its founder.

Mr Calvin Yang, founder of local label Headline, which has shops in Haji Lane and Far East Plaza, had a blue Christmas last year, when business dipped by 30 per cent.

He hopes that this Christmas, the tills will ring up 30 per cent more. Instead of slashing prices, he will give away 200 limited edition shirts with purchases. "We really hope this will pull in sales."

Jon Orchard, which opened in July, is seeing high levels of traffic leading to its first Christmas.

Said a spokesman: "Since our opening in July, more than 15 million visitors have visited Jon Orchard, with the average daily number during peak periods and festive occasions at over 200,000."

Christmas and New Year, taken together, is one of two peaks in Singapore's retail calendar. The other is the Great Singapore Sale (GSS).

"Given that the GSS is a sale, and goods are offered at very low margins and sometimes even at negative margins, the year-end shopping is very important to retailers. It is a time when they can try to turn in better margins," said Ms Lau Chuen Wei, executive director of the Singapore Retailers Association.

Retail consultant Lynda Wee said the challenge for retailers this year end will be to get Singaporeans to spend their money here.

Given that recovery is on track, many Singaporeans may choose to travel next month and do their Christmas shopping overseas, said Dr Wee, who runs

Restaurateur Juan R. Jimenez of Lawry's The Prime Rib

Bootstrap, a business consultancy.

"Singaporeans are prepared to spend, but local retailers have to work harder to make sure they spend here."

Her advice to businesses: get customers "emotional" about Christmas.

"Cue them in with decorations, display and service, make them feel good so they will buy. Then closer to Christmas, with panic buying, make sure you have stocks, your sales people are efficient, and help the shoppers fulfil their Christmas stocking list."

But event firms say companies are still not splashing out on year-end parties despite the better economic outlook.

(RA) events founder Christopher Andre Porter misses the boom year of 2007, when companies splurged on events.

Then, they spent as much as \$10,000 just on the entertainment tab for their dinner and dance (D&D) events. Last year, the budget was between \$6,000 and \$7,000. From bookings this year, it has fallen to between \$2,000 and \$3,000.

"Last year, companies had planned and booked their D&Ds in advance, like in June and July, and that was before the recession started," said Mr Porter, whose business usually doubles in December. He is projecting a more conservative increase this year.

Some companies still want their D&Ds, but shave costs by doing away with emcees or opting to hold the event in October and November, when it is cheaper.

Mr Aden Liu, founder of Maverique events company, said he knew of companies that were putting up their own shows rather than hiring professional event planners.

But he has worked hard to cope, and his business has actually gone up by 20 to 25 per cent compared to that last year.

"Knowing that this would be a bad year, I pushed my team harder, and so we have new companies engaging our services this year.

"They are more diverse too, ranging from manufacturing and chemical industries to the service industry and government agencies."

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