

Agricultural entrepreneur reflects on challenges of expansion

Xi Rou, Lu Yuyao and Yang Di

My name is Gu Fengjun, but I prefer to be called 'Tomato Sister,' Gu often introduces herself this way.

Gu is the founder of the Shanghai Baitkey Vegetable and Fruit Planting Cooperative and Shanghai Baitkey Agricultural Science and Technology Co Ltd. From selling vegetables at a stall to running a small business delivering fresh produce, and eventually founding an agricultural cooperative and creating a one-stop service supply chain, Gu has been deeply engaged in the field of agriculture for nearly 30 years.

Starting as a novice in agriculture to becoming a recognized entrepreneurial role model in the industry, each step she has taken reflects her unique bond with the land and her unwavering commitment to it.

Today, the Shanghai Baitkey Vegetable and Fruit Planting Cooperative owns over 2,000 *mu* (1.33 hectares) of farmland and partners with more than 15,000 *mu* of farmland across the country, benefiting over 270 farming households in areas such as Shanghai, and Shandong and Yunnan provinces.

Baitkey has also established two vegetable processing plants and a 2,000-square-meter distribution center, offering more than 80 varieties of vegetables from its farms.

In 1996, when Gu was selling vegetables at the market, she would wake up at 4am or 5am, set up her stall and, after closing for the day, head to the wholesale market to restock. Despite the hard work, she never gave up on agriculture.

Editor's note:

As the 2024 Jiading District Women's Innovation and Entrepreneurship Competition began in May, a new wave of innovative female entrepreneurs have emerged. In this column, we will share the stories of some of those female entrepreneurs in Jiading, offering readers an insight into their outstanding achievements and exceptional spirit in their journeys of innovation and entrepreneurship.

What followed was a journey of constant "leveling up" as she expanded her business.

"Selling vegetables was incredibly challenging, but looking back on nearly three decades in the field, I would choose agriculture again," Gu said. "Because it brings a great sense of fulfillment. Seeing plump tomatoes on the vine or hearing praise for the deliciousness of our fruits and vegetables brings me great joy."

In recent years, Baitkey has expanded its product line to include a variety of salad greens, complemented by herbs, while the Huangdu tomato has emerged as a signature product in the agricultural eco-park, earning consumer acclaim for both its quality and flavor.

As early as 2016, Gu was amazed by the taste of Huangdu tomatoes, which are sweet with a hint of acidity. This led her to choose them as a breakthrough product.

She partnered with the Shanghai Academy of Agricultural Sciences to develop soil improvement techniques for Huangdu tomatoes, combining traditional methods with modern approaches. This preserved their traditional taste and improved their flavor, establishing them as the "star



Gu Fengjun



Gu Fengjun (left) promotes her organic salad from the Baitkey farms at a farmer's market.



Huangdu tomatoes are renowned as the "star product" of Anting Town in Jiading.

product" of Baitkey and Anting Town. Her success in this endeavor earned her the nickname "Tomato Sister."

"The classic color of Huangdu tomatoes is red with a touch of yellow, and they have a thin skin, juicy flesh and a unique flavor that is sweet and sticky, with a sandy texture. They taste quite different from most tomatoes on the market," Gu said.

Reflecting on her entrepreneurial journey, Gu expressed gratitude for significant support from the Jiading Women's Federation. To her, the federation is not only a home for female compatriots, but also an important platform for fostering the growth and development of female entrepreneurs.

"We used to only focus on our small piece of land, but after joining the Women's Federation, I had the opportunity to meet more outstanding women," Gu said.

Encouraged by other female entrepreneurs, Gu began venturing into agricultural and tourism industries. Through project-based collaboration, she integrated production, research, education and popular science with

agriculture, culture and tourism to extend the agricultural industry chain.

"Entering our eco-park is like stepping into a natural energy field," Gu said. "The air, water and plants here are all pure, making it an ideal place for family activities."

The eco-park hosts activities such as fishing competitions, family salons and storybook reading sessions, becoming a relaxation spot for city residents to experience the strength of nature and agriculture.

At Shanghai Baitkey Agricultural Science and Technology Co Ltd, 65 percent of the employees are women.

"Women are detail-oriented, thoughtful, and have a natural sense of responsibility," Gu said. To nurture more female talent, she provides her female employees with more learning and development opportunities, helping them unlock their full potential.

"In the future, I will pass my strength on to more women, allowing them to find value in both their work and lives, and to establish themselves firmly," Gu said.