

While there are efforts to preserve the ice cream cart business, the vendors seem to accept that they are part of a dying trade

Bittersweet end for ice cream uncles?



AUDREY LEONG

A big yellow, red or blue umbrella covers a small motorcycle attached to a hawkker cart.

It is a welcome sight on a scorching day for Singaporeans and tourists – but the “ice cream uncle” is becoming harder to spot.

Mr Chan Yong Leng, who has been an ice cream uncle for four decades, said there was a time when there were more than 50 ice cream vendors lining Orchard Road.

“Now there is only a handful left,” the 69-year-old told The New Paper in Mandarin when we visited him at his cart outside Ngee Ann City two weeks ago.

“Nowadays, Singaporeans would rather spend money on having ice cream in an air-conditioned place.”

Mr Tan Kim Phoon, 75, an ice cream vendor outside Paragon shopping centre in Orchard Road, said he knows of three other ice cream vendors who have died.

He said: “There is not much of a future for ice cream uncles any more. Once we are gone, there won’t be anyone to take over.”

F&N Creameries, the only supplier of block ice cream packs for the vendors, estimated that there are more than 150 ice cream carts in Singapore.

However, the company said it has “seen a drop in the number of hawkers, which in turn has affected the number of hawkers who have purchased from us”, but it will continue to support them.

A spokesman for the National Environment Agency said that as of June, more than 200 licensed hawkers have chosen to sell ice cream.

Some hawkers TNP spoke to said it is hard to get the young interested in the business.

On top of that, the daily overheads can also be high.

Dry ice – necessary to keep the ice cream frozen – costs \$20 to \$80 daily, depending on how many hours these uncles work.

They also need to buy wafers, bread, spoons, napkins and of course, the ice cream itself.

Mr Tan said on a good day, he makes \$60 to \$70 in a five-hour shift. On bad or rainy days, he



Mr Chan Yong Leng has been an ice cream uncle for four decades. TNP PHOTO: AUDREY LEONG

might not even make a cent.

The ice cream uncles also said they are seeing fewer Singaporeans buy from them.

Mr Tan said: “I see more tourists from Indonesia and China. Very few locals, only about 10 or so a night.”

Miss Anisah Azmi, 20, a university student, used to love buying ice cream from such vendors as a child, until the number of vendors in her Tampines neighbourhood started dwindling.

She said: “There are still those along Orchard Road, but they are not as special to me.”

In recent years, F&N introduced new flavours such as green tea and vanilla to “give consumers more options” as well as give Singaporeans “more reasons” to stop by the carts.

VARIETY

But the challenges these vendors face go deeper than mere variety of flavours.

Enter four business students from the Singapore Management University, who recently won the F&N Creameries Ice Cream Brand Challenge.

It seeks to give students opportunities to conceptualise solutions and marketing strategies to revamp the ice cream hawkker cart and existing business model.

Miss Vivian Lim, 22, Mr Lester Thio, 23, Mr Ethan Hu, 24, and Mr Yeo Khee, 24, in-

terviewed ice cream uncles in Hougang, Toa Payoh and in town to find out about the difficulties they faced.

Through their interviews, the group, Team Lyve, found that vendors faced a language barrier while trying to talk to tourists.

That led to an idea to revamp the current menu, so that tourists are aware of all the options available.

“For us, we know that there are three options because we are local, but the menu shows only the bread and the wafer, but not the cup,” Mr Thio said.

The team was also keen to help the vendors save money on dry ice, which costs \$8 a block.

“Even before they start business for the day, they would already be making a loss of \$72 just from the cost of dry ice alone,” said Miss Lim.

The team calculated that to break even, the vendor would have to sell 60 cups of ice cream a day.

They are hoping solar panels can be installed at each cart, which will not only cut down on dry ice costs but also help both the vendors and the customers keep cool.

The group also offered a larger plan to officially brand the ice cream uncles as a national icon and use social media to update fans on the location of the carts around the island.

The team members also suggest that other local brands can

collaborate by creating unique and local flavours. The team’s winning pitch may soon be rolled out by F&N Creameries.

According to Mr Lee Yeau Yin, head of F&N Creameries ice cream division, selected ice cream hawkker carts along Orchard Road will get revamped carts, and the company is looking into implementing a “comprehensive plan for a smooth transition from the old to the new hawkker cart”.

The revamped carts will be more attractive and feature the

newly designed menus.

They will also be more pleasant for the vendors, with padded seats that allow them to be more comfortable when they are selling the ice cream.

Despite the promising plans the team has for ice cream uncles, they themselves seem to have accepted that they are part of a dying trade.

Mr Tan said: “We are old. I don’t think you can teach us anything new any more.”

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