

NEW GENERATION BREW

Coffee Break's new breed of hawkers is taking Singapore's favourite drinks to new places

Coffee Break is a drinks stall at Amoy Street Food Centre that is run by third-generation "hawkerpreneurs" Jack Sai, 32, and his sisters, twins Faye and Anna, 29.

Although they are helming a family business that boasts a long legacy — 81 years, to be exact — the young and passionate crew are not afraid to change things up a little with some creative additions. For starters, they are proffering an improved blend of coffee beans that goes into their bold variety of flavoured coffee drinks, and are coming up with quirky spreads for their toast.

"It's not our aim to appear cool or hipster; we just want to provide a bit of diversity," said Jack, who graduated from Singapore Management University's School of Social Sciences with a degree in political science. He was the first to join the family business full-time in 2011.

According to him, more people are buying into these new fangled concoctions. "It has always been this way ... you have people who want (their coffee) less sweet, less thick, and now people are more daring in trying different flavours, even older folks."

But unlike the usual machine-pulled espresso drinks, theirs are sock-brewed the traditional way, which is less time-consuming, shared Faye, who is also a graduate but majored in marketing at the Singapore Institute of Management.

"Sock-brewed coffee is something that Singaporeans are very familiar



The Sai siblings, Faye, Anna and Jack, are not afraid to change things up a little with some creative additions. PHOTO: DON MENDOZA

with, and it is inexpensive," she added, explaining how Robusta, as opposed to the more expensive Arabica, beans are used in making the traditional kopi drinks. These are roasted with sugar and margarine, which she highlighted brings out the natural flavours of the beans while keeping the cost low.

"The flavours are more unique and very Singaporean, but doesn't pale in comparison with a latte made with Arabica beans," she affirmed.

For their preferred blend of coffee, though, green coffee beans are bought from Indonesia and roasted locally by a licenced roaster to their specifications, which regulates the amount of sugar and margarine used, and the length of time the beans are roasted. Their updated recipe also uses melted sugar (like a syrup) and a mixer. "In the old days, they would roast the beans until they are about 80 per cent done, then they would add the margarine and continue to roast until 100 per cent before mixing in the sugar," she explained.

This, she said, imparts a stronger roast flavour, and is necessary as Robusta beans, which are commonly grown at a lower altitude, lack the complex and wide range of flavours of Arabica beans that are grown at a higher elevation. But because the new method uses sugar that is first melted, it is better absorbed by the beans, she said, adding that the beans are ground on site.

Aside from the traditional kopi variations, Coffee Break also serves lattes and flavoured coffee drinks, made using "sock-brewed espresso". In the coffee industry, and especially with speciality coffee, it is not uncommon to find drinks made using a variety of methods, said Faye, who spent a year picking up the craft of pulling a proper shot at Selfish Gene Cafe and Strangers' Reunion before joining the family business.

With the sock method, the coffee is brewed using very hot water and a "quick stirring" method to extract more flavour in the shortest time possible. More coffee is also used for a more concentrated "shot". Their

lattes feature a blend of Arabica and Robusta beans for a more fragrant and complex profile. "That's why (our lattes) taste stronger than those you normally find in a cafe."

Beyond the brew, the siblings have also developed homemade spreads for their toast in interesting flavours such as strawberry creme, matcha, coconut, cinnamon sugar and black sesame. Rest assured, they still maintain the traditional kaya spread, which they've been getting from the same supplier since the days their grandfather ran the shop.

Ground black sesame in coffee is also a popular combination, even among older consumers. These creative pairings were inspired by their travels overseas, such as the addition of pumpkin spice, which they had in a drink from Starbucks in Versailles, France.

The idea to incorporate sea salt-mint came from a dessert Jack came across during a trip to Iran. "You can try to pair these with traditional coffee, which is less popular, but most customers have them in a latte or mocha," said Faye, who stressed that their blend of Arabica and Robusta beans is also better suited to pair with such unique flavours. "Some of our regulars who got tired of their usual kopi-C or kopi kosong decided to add mint or hazelnut," she shared, and for some of them, these are now their preferred drinks.

Moving forward, they are preparing to open a standalone outlet at a new office building, located next to Kent Ridge MRT Station, by end-September, which Jack said the sisters will run, while he will continue to man the Amoy Street stall. There are also plans to open a third outlet at Raffles Place by the end of the year or by January next year, which is why they are looking to hire, he added.

"No experience required," he assured. "We will provide the training."

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Coffee Break is located at #02-78 Amoy Food Centre. For more information, call 8100 6218.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 24

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 23

KUEH FIX TO LIFE

A humble Teochew snack finds a new lease of life thanks to social media and One Kueh At A Time

When you think about where you might get your hands on a silky piece of soon kueh (turnip dumplings), a hipster third-wave coffee house or a fusion restaurant is probably not the first place that would come to mind.

But that has changed. Meet Nick Soon, a kueh evangelist whose tiny stall in Berseh Food Centre has transformed the humble soon kueh, gu chye kueh (chive dumpling) and png kueh (rice dumpling). The 48-year-old opened One Kueh At A Time on Dec 20, 2014, after a career crisis.

"I was searching for a change after working in insurance for more than 20 years," said Soon, who was a financial consultant. "The 2008 financial crisis also got me thinking about whether there was more to life than just chasing material success, but it took me three to four years before I finally did it."

Soon learnt the skills from his parents, who had taught themselves to make these traditional kuehs and sold them to friends as a small side business. Soon's initial plan to sell wholesale to

shops and cafes had failed to take off. Undeterred, he decided to go directly to customers by opening a hawker stall.

"My parents didn't have the guts to set up a stall as they didn't think it was possible. They were really happy when I opened One Kueh At A Time," shared Soon. Before he knew it, the Instagram posts of his attempts at making photogenic kuehs started attracting die-hard foodies and followers to his stall. And a series of appearances at pop-up events such as Lepak at the National Museum in January last year quickly followed.

Soon's experiences at those events opened up new possibilities: "I was approached by the organisers, and these pop-up events showed me how things can be done differently, such as styling the kuehs on wooden chopping blocks and creating a vegan version of the soon kueh to appeal to younger and health-conscious customers. In fact, the vegan version sold out quickly during a Night Fest pop-up event at the National Design Centre last year."

At the same time, One Kueh At A Time gained more popularity as the food scene got wind of his delicious handmade kuehs and his mid-life career switch. He even got his moment in the international spotlight with features on websites such as Huffington



Top: Miso barramundi with sakura ebi soon kueh. Above: Nick Soon at his pride and joy, the One Kueh At A Time stall in Jalan Berseh.

Post, Eater, CNN and Serious Eats.

More recently in May, Soon tied up with small plates restaurant Morsels as part of a kueh and wine pairing dinner where he replaced the traditional fillings with the likes of sakura ebi plated alongside miso barramundi, and created another version stuffed with yam paste for dessert. "There was great synergy in the collaboration," said owner-chef of Morsels, Petrina Loh. "Nick's trying to keep traditional food alive, and I'm constantly trying to weave traditional food into our fusion plates."

And in what must seem like coming a full circle, his kuehs just got stocked in Chye Seng Huat Hardware Coffee last week.

As Soon's kuehs are entirely handmade, he can only produce a limited number every day. The current space he has prevents him from hiring any apprentices, and Soon is looking for a larger space with a proper kitchen.

In the meantime, he is happy taking it, well, one kueh at a time. "Never in my wildest dreams did I think selling soon kueh could lead to all this. I'm so grateful for the response," said Soon.

"I've met some mid-life executives who come up to me at the stall asking for advice about leaving their jobs, or sharing their dream of opening a food stall. I tell them 'just do it'. If you don't, you'd never know." **SERENE LIM**

One Kueh At A Time is located at #02-61 Berseh Food Centre. For more information, call 9795 6119.