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One-stop foodie A new online emporium devotes itself to discovering indie food and kitchenware to help elevate domesticity to an art. By May Yip

OU might not need a concrete paperweight in the shape of png kueh, or a US\$200 chopping board engraved with a banana and five mangosteens, arranged to resemble our national symbol of five stars and a crescent moon. But a visit to Batch (www.batch.sg) certainly makes you feel like you do. The freshly-launched online gourmet platform is designed to connect food lovers with the products lovingly crafted by independent food makers, chefs and kitchen artisans. You won't find mass-produced supermarket goods here - every item is carefully handpicked for quality and taste by founder Debbie Yong.

"It was while covering the rise of local foodmakers - a growing group of Singaporeans who make preservative-free granola, jams, sambals, nut milks and so on, that I saw how many of them struggled to handle their own sales and marketing channels because they have to juggle these on top of their day jobs, on top of making the food," says Ms Yong, who has been covering the food beat for The Business Times for the past three years. "It then led me to think: why not gath-

er all these artisanal products at a one-stop

shop, like an online store?" Ms Yong pitched the idea to the management of Singapore Press Holdings, which granted her seed money under the company's business incubator scheme to develop her e-commerce site. She has since amassed a wide range of craft food and kitchenware, including a "Batch X" line of exclusive collaboration items created just for the site like a special Singapore Sling-inspired granola flavour by Eastern Granola, chef Shen Tan's sambals and Restaurant Labyrinth's balsamic jam. While there are specialty products created by chefs like a set of chef and steak knives by The Tippling Club chef-owner Ryan Clift, or a double boiler conceptualised by Justin Quek and local design agency Artifela, you don't have to be a Gwyneth-wannabe to enjoy the site.

"I'm at the age where most of my friends are married or getting married and moving into their own homes," explains Ms Yong,

29. "They are cooking together more often, growing their own gardens, and buying more things for their kitchens and living spaces and looking for resources to help them do so."

MS YONG

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The site also serves as a resource for home cooks and foodies looking for recipes and ingredient features, with plans to include behind-the-scenes interviews and videos with food makers and chefs designed with the aim of building a virtual community of foodies of all levels. Ms Yong hopes to tap on her close ties with local chefs and food personalities within the Singapore F&B industry to dispense useful kitchen tips on the latest food trends such as cold-brewing, cooking with Himalayan salt slabs, or barrel-ageing your own cocktails at home. Meanwhile, her childhood friend and civil-serv- ESTHER Ang's story of making a leap from a successful ant-turned-stay-home mum Stephanie Lim contributes recipes and corporate career to being a first-time entrepreneur is not home entertaining tips to Batch.

full-fledged domestic gods and goddesses, helps maximise the mileage of each purchase. The site even includes a range of cookbooks for a literal interpretation of her beliefs, however, Ms Ang's those hoping to expand their gastronomic repertoire to impress guests at dinner parties. "From my own experience, I know that after splurging on a S\$20 bottle of premium sauce or S\$200 for a handcrafted chopping board, I would want to use them in the best way possible," says Ms Yong. "So we work directly with leading bartenders, chefs and craftsmen to offer recipe suggestions and usage and storage tips for each item."

Want to try the products out the old-fashioned way? Ms Yong is also in discussion with a few partners to launch retail pop-ups for Christmas. In the meantime, here's a peek at the craftsmen behind the thoughtfully designed products.

unique. What stands out, however, is the idea for Grace-Such a pool of expert suggestions, designed for budding or smiths, which uses art and design to create everyday lifeproducts are utterly contemporary with a healthy dose of cheek.

"I came up with the creative concepts for most of the products, normally while having showers," reveals Ms Ang, who started her lifestyle product company in 2012 after working in several top Fortune 500 companies.

"For example, the Providence range of cushions available through Batch was inspired by the story of how Jesus multiplied five loaves of bread and two fish to feed multitudes of people. Daily provision resonates easily with peo-

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CONVERSATION STARTER Gracesmiths' Providence range of cushions (left) was inspired by the parable of how Jesus multiplied five loaves of bread and two fish to feed multitudes of people

ple, especially in a high-cost living country like Singapore!

Each design is a conversation starter, like the puffer fish and croissant-shaped cushion used to represent the loaves and fish in the parable, and also has an element of social consciousness - the pieces are, for example, hand-sewn by disadvantaged women from the Mother and Child project.

While it is important for the business to be commercially sustainable, the businesswoman tries to improve lives through the enterprise and started out by hiring a WHAT started as a fun activity to be enjoyed with her husseamstress who is from the lower-income group to sew band grew into a full-time career for Lee Huiwen, a home-

PASSION FOR CERAMICS Mr Leow (right) is a third-year student at Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts majoring in ceramics. His works (above), which bear a distinctly Japanese aesthetic, have already been shown at the recent 16th International Chawan Exposition, a showcase for ceramic arts

the Providence range of cushions and pouches locally. Seeing how the work has benefited her, she expanded the concept by providing financial support to disadvantaged women in Singapore through sewing work. She adds: "There's a special authenticity about items

made with hands that a commercialised, mass-produced item cannot replicate. I think it's because each item carries with it a piece of the maker's heart and soul."

Zestro Leow

"My husband and I picked up pottery because we STILL in his third year as a fine art student at Nanyang wanted to learn something together," explains Ms Lee. Academy of Fine Arts, majoring in ceramics, Zestro Leow "We had just gotten married but were so busy with our has already shown at the recent 16th International Chacareers that we hardly had time to do anything as a couwan Exposition, an international showcase for ceramic ple. He had a great experience doing pottery in secondarts. ary school and was very convincing!"

"I believe clay is not just a medium in art; it is a matter She picked up the craft in Singapore, but it was only that is constantly changing," says Mr Leow, who is selling when she enrolled in an immersive programme in the some sake sets, vases and plates through Batch. "With expottery town of Tajimi, Japan, that she decided to take cess water, it transforms from solid into slip. Allowing the the plunge and become a ceramist. clay to evaporate its moisture will change its consistency. "The lifestyle there is simple but extremely fulfilling," Within the process of creating a ceramic artwork, underrecalls Ms Lee. "People grow their own vegetables and standing the consistency of the clay is the most importhe young potters I met are really dedicated to their art, tant issue."

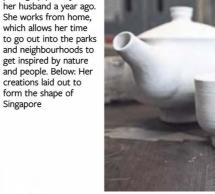
Having first majored in western painting, Mr Leow was introduced to ceramics through an elective course and developed a strong passion for the medium over time. His pieces bear a distinctly Japanese aesthetic, raw

Now, she works from a home studio which allows her and organic at first blush, yet exuding a refined, beautifultime to go out into the parks and neighbourhoods to get ly conceived vision when held and appreciated. inspired by nature and people. The actual building, dry-"Nature has inspired me a lot," says the young ceing, firing and glazing process can take anything from a ramist. "Besides the different forms and textures, I look few days to a few weeks. And although her business, Stuinto what is beneath the surface of nature." dio Asobi, was founded only a few months ago, she has Beyond serving as decorative objects or vessels, Mr experienced a growing interest in ceramics, especially Leow hopes to communicate his hard work, energy and from young working professionals in their 20s and 30s innermost workings as an artist to an audience. "When Ms Lee also sells her works to ceramic collectors, as well people observe my artworks, I want them to appreciate as others who are looking for functional wares or the entire journey of creating an artwork from scratch, presents.

and not just the final presentation that is before them." says the driven, down-to-earth student,

"I believe that the audience should appreciate an artwork by studying its concept and craftsmanship. This will enable the audience to look into the process of how an artwork is created, and hence, look forward to more amazing works to be created by the artist."

Studio Asob



NATURE-INSPIRED Ms Lee (left) set up Studio Asobi after picking up pottery with

Singapore





grown ceramist who creates one-off, nature-inspired works. It all began a year ago, when the Singapore Management University business graduate, who was in real estate business development before working for a non-governmental organisation, took a sabbatical.

staying humble and cheerful even though their income is not always forthcoming. My sensei is 74 years old and still shows up daily to work and teach and feast with his students."

After several friends requested to be taught the basics of ceramics, she started a monthly workshop, aimed at giving beginners a hands-on experience with making their very own clay vessel.

"It was daunting at first, but gradually I convinced myself that if I have found something beautiful, there is no reason why I shouldn't be sharing it with others," says Ms Lee. "And it brings me a lot of joy to see the smiles on people's faces when they discover the hidden artist within themselves!"