



Ms Pauline Ng (far left) and her mother Jenny Teng are behind home-grown brand Porcelain, The Face Spa. ST PHOTO: LIM SIN THAI

Two's Company With Founders Of Porcelain, The Face Spa

More than skin deep

Jenny Teng understands how bad skin can affect one's confidence, being a victim herself in her teens. She and her daughter Pauline Ng now run a boutique spa with its own skincare brand



Ankita Varma

The latest outlets of Porcelain, The Face Spa occupy swish premises in Orchard Gateway and Tanjong Pagar Centre, but the co-founder of the boutique spa, Ms Jenny Teng, 52, says her beginnings were a lot more humble.

She says: "My first shop was run out of a tiny rented bomb shelter in Jurong, you know? If you asked me

10 years ago if I would one day have a successful chain of spas in Singapore, I would have said no lah, not possible."

Known for its thorough and clarifying facials, Porcelain was started by Ms Teng and her daughter Pauline Ng, 30, in 2009 in Cantonment Road. It has now expanded to include the two treatment centres in central Singapore and offers an in-house range of customised skincare products.

The home-grown brand has also snagged the title of Best Luxury Beauty Spa in Asia at the World Luxury Spa Awards consecutively between 2013 and last year, and currently boasts a waitlist of between four and six weeks for its facial treatments.

Despite her success, it is evident that Ms Teng, who is also the brand's director aesthetician, has not forgotten her roots.

"My journey was really one of trial and error and learning on the job," she says when asked about how she started in the industry in the early 1990s. "When I started my business at 25, I had just graduated from a beauty course and barely had any customers. I used to have

to hand out fliers to get the word out about my place."

She also relied on support from friends and family in the initial months. Her business, then known as J Phline, was just a tiny two-bed outfit behind a doctor's office in Jurong.

Her dedication to her craft soon turned curious patrons into repeat customers. She would sometimes spend more than two hours on clients, making notes about their skin condition while carefully doing deep extractions to clear their congested skin.

She also began researching products and essential oils to find concoctions that could clear congested skin in Singapore's humid climate.

A victim of problematic skin herself when she was a teenager, the mother of two says her personal experience was what made her so invested in helping people fix their skin issues.

"I knew what it felt like - being self-conscious and sad because of how my skin looked. I think that's why from the get-go, my aim was to do what I could to help people like myself."

Ms Teng also has a son, aged 28,

who is not involved in the business.

Unlike quick-fix spas that focused on superficial cleansing, Ms Teng's emphasis on deep extractions - a service not commonly available then - set her apart from the crowd. So did her diligent follow-ups with clients, making sure to alter treatments as their skin changed.

Her client roster grew to an average of nine customers a day and many followed her when she moved from Jurong to her own shop in Bukit Batok and later to West Coast and Clementi.

Things went well for nearly a decade during the time in Clementi. Then, the double blow of the Asian financial crisis in the late 1990s followed by the Sars epidemic in 2003 took the wind out of her sails.

Faced with dwindling customers and an inability to pay the rent, Ms Teng was forced to wind up the business in 2004.

It did not help that despite having a heart for her work, the friendly entrepreneur did not have a head for business.

"Just because some long-term customers cannot pay sometimes does not mean I should just cut them off

and not do facials for them, right?" she says.

"I never kept proper books back then. I empathise with people, so I would put the needs of my customers over the needs of my business."

After her shop in Clementi shuttered, she spent the next few years doing ad-hoc facials out of her home. But when her daughter graduated from Singapore Management University (SMU) with a business degree in 2009, she began entertaining thoughts of restarting the business.

For Ms Ng - co-founder and managing director of Porcelain - going into business with her mother was not something she had thought about. Despite running a small events management company while at SMU, she says a new business was not something she considered at the time as she had school loans to pay off.

"When I offered to help my mum restart her business, I assumed it would be a two-week stint - just driving her around to see shop spaces and that sort of thing," she says with a laugh. "It's quite amazing how that turned into a seven-year career."

Dare to bare: Spa therapists wear no foundation

FROM D1

She had intended to work in public relations, but changed her mind when she realised that her mother often made bad decisions when it came to finances or logistics.

"I realised that she might need to outsource the business functions so she could focus on the treatments, which were her area of expertise."

But it was a conversation with an old client of her mother's that finally convinced her to come on board and take the reins of the business.

"She told me how much my mother had helped her skin over the years and really turned it around," recalls Ms Ng, who is married. "That's when I realised how skilled my mother was as an aesthetician - she just needed help to manage the running of the business."

Her husband works in the finance industry and they have no children.

With investments from family members and her mother's own savings, the duo restarted the business as Porcelain, The Face Spa at a second-floor shophouse unit in Cantonment Road. With Ms Ng focusing on marketing efforts in the initial months and word-of-mouth recommendations from satisfied customers, their appointment book started filling up.

Within six months, they had hired their first full-time assistant and, by the end of the first year, had expanded from an initial two beds to four to keep up with demand.

Ms Ng also began researching equipment and skincare products extensively after taking in feedback from her mother, their staff and customers.

People often pile on make-up to hide their problem skin, but I always ask my clients - how long do you want to keep covering it up?



MS JENNY TENG

"What I realised after charting the experience of our customers was that there was a gap in skincare solutions available that would balance congested skin, but still suit our climate," she says.

"There was also a group of customers whose skin had improved, but were looking for treatments that were preventative or for maintenance - which was something our facials could help with only to a certain extent."

Realising the brand had to invest in technology and exclusive skincare products, she began research in 2010, working with labs in Taiwan and the United States to come up with products and attending trade shows to find the best technology for their business.

The result was the launch of the brand's first skincare product - its best-selling sebum control essence - at the end of 2010 and the launch of Porcelain Aesthetics at Orchard Gateway in 2014. The new outlet focuses on equipment-based treatments. The business also became GST-registered in 2013 when it hit \$1 million in revenue.

Today, the Porcelain skincare line has expanded to include 17 products. Last month, the brand also opened its newest outlet, Porcelain Signatures, at Tanjong Pagar Centre. The biggest of the three outlets, it offers the full range of treatments, including the all-time favourite Quintessential facial (which starts from \$374.50), as well as technology-based treatments such as Cryotherapy.

Despite being semi-retired, Ms Teng continues to handpick and train therapists for six months to a year before they are allowed to do extractions on clients.

Equipment is tested over a year to monitor long-term effects on the skin before it is introduced into the spa.

Therapists at Porcelain also do not wear any foundation while on the job, a practice instituted by the owners to instil confidence in customers.

"People often pile on make-up to hide their problem skin, but I always ask my clients - how long do you want to keep covering it up?" says Ms Teng.

"I'm so proud that Pauline has helped me realise my dream and I am able to help more people through Porcelain. The least we can do is set the right example - after all, this is what I am most passionate about."

avarma@sph.com.sg



Ms Pauline Ng and mum Jenny Teng at Ms Ng's wedding in 2011. PHOTO: COURTESY OF PAULINE NG

Jenny Teng on Pauline Ng

Letting her little girl soar

Ms Jenny Teng's biggest lesson after working for seven years with her daughter is to trust her.

"You must keep an open mind and just have faith that your children can handle themselves," she says.

For the 52-year-old, it was not a realisation that came easily or quickly.

After running her business on her own for two decades, having her daughter come on board and reorganise systems and processes was not something that she was able to adapt to at first.

"In the beginning we would always quarrel because I wanted things done a certain way, but Pauline would want to try things a new way."

Her protective mother instincts also meant that she felt the need to look over the shoulder of her daughter.

But Ms Teng says she now realises her daughter is capable of soaring on her own.

"I've realised how much her organisation and careful planning has helped this business grow. She also has a lot more foresight than I do. So now, I don't double-guess her decisions and trust that she knows what she is doing."

She admits that it is sometimes hard for her to separate work and business, but says she has become better at not taking disagreements personally.

"In the beginning, I would take everything to heart, but now I realise that we need to compartmentalise."

"When you work with family, disagreements are bound to happen, but, thankfully, it helps that we are fulfilling a dream together. That is what I am most proud of."

Pauline Ng on Jenny Teng

Working with mum is tricky business

Asked for the secret behind the comfortable working relationship with her mother, Ms Pauline Ng says with a laugh: "Keeping a respectful distance."

"When you're working with family, setting boundaries and clear responsibilities early on becomes key to keeping your relationship smooth. We were lucky that we did that from the get-go."

For the mother-daughter duo behind the Porcelain brand, that has meant letting mum Jenny Teng focus on treatments and staff training while Ms Ng handles everything else - including finance, logistics and product procurement.

To help Ms Ng manage her workload, they have in recent years hired a four-person management team to handle marketing, human relations and accounts.

Says Ms Ng, 30: "It can get tricky working with a parent, especially if both of you have strong personalities, as is the case with us. But the important thing is to remember why you started on the project and not let emotions get in the way."

She says she is grateful to have had her mother's experience and passion for the industry to learn from. A case in point is the one time she scolded her mother for giving away free products to clients instead of charging them.

"Initially I thought what she was doing was so counter-intuitive. But I later realised that customers who got a chance to see the products' benefits were more likely to return and spend their money on our services," says Ms Ng.

"It is why we now give products to new customers who sign up with us. My mother's feedback really shaped our marketing and sales strategies."

For her, helping her mother realise her dream is her biggest reward as an entrepreneur.

"Not a lot of people can say they have built something with their family from the ground up. At the end of the day, that is what puts the petty issues into perspective for me."