

# Acing adversity

Talk about a productive pandemic. Driven by necessity or simply having more free time, these people embarked on ambitious projects under the shadow of Covid-19. A world record was claimed, books were written and entrepreneurs emerged. Here are some ideas on how to make good use of a pandemic



---

Venessa Lee  
Correspondent

---

## Pals sell Japanese groceries



MoguShop founders Lavender Chia (above left) and Rebecca Kwan (right) at their warehouse. The online shop sells Japanese items such as rice, sauces, salt, meat, uni (sea urchin) and crisps with flavours like unagi (eel) and plum bonito. ST PHOTO: JOEL CHAN

Best friends Rebecca Kwan and Lavender Chia had just registered their new online business. The 24-year-olds were flush with excitement, brimming with plans for MoguShop, which would sell Japanese groceries.

Mere hours later, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong announced plans for a circuit breaker to stem the spread of Covid-19.

That fateful day in early April last year is one they will never forget.

Ms Chia recalls: "There was no time to feel sorry (for ourselves). It was about how we were going to build a new brand when people were seeking comfort and security with more established brands."

The duo became firm friends while studying and munching their way through Singapore Management University. They shared a love of Japanese food, but often lamented the high prices and wanted to bring in more affordable options.

Before pooling their savings and investing a five-figure sum with two others to start MoguShop, Ms Chia worked for 10 months as an account executive in the food and beverage industry. This is Ms Kwan's first job after graduating in December 2019.

MoguShop sells a range of Japanese items such as rice, sauces, salt, meat, uni (sea urchin) and crisps with flavours like unagi (eel) and plum bonito. They contacted some of their suppliers through Japanese prefecture trade associations.

Before the pandemic hit, they planned to approach the market through pop-up stores. But Covid-19 paved the way for community group buys, where they sold their products in bulk, liaising with the management at condominiums.

They also hopped onto the Facebook live-stream bandwagon, which took off last year. Ms Chia would host the sessions showcasing their products, sometimes chomping on mentaiko-flavoured rice crackers to show their appeal.

"Covid-19 gifting" – gift packages delivered to friends and family – was another big trend they benefited from.

But there were challenges too. Prices of some supplies rose by 30 per cent amid the uncertainty of the pandemic. Packaging costs also rocketed.

Still, Ms Chia reports that MoguShop, which has two other employees, is "on the brink of breaking even" in 10 months.

It now stocks 700 items, up from 150 at the beginning. At the end of last year, it launched Snackbar, a line of Japanese snacks and beverages.

The pair say their friendship has been strengthened through becoming business partners in a pandemic.

Ms Chia says: "We complement each other well. We're both responsible and we always want to do better."