



The start-up scene is packed with flashy funding announcements, but what really goes on behind the glitz and glamour? In this series, The Straits Times sits down with founders to discover how they developed their ideas, and what it takes to ride the roller coaster of entrepreneurship.



Co-founders of Fogo Fungi (from left) Jonathan Chen, Felix-Constantin Dörner and Ryan Ong with the mushrooms grown in Mr Chen's spare bedroom. Most of the mushrooms produced are lesser-known varieties that stand out for their unique tastes and textures, including the pink oyster and lion's mane. ST PHOTOS: KEVIN LIM

Fogo-ing leisure to grow mushrooms in bedroom



Fogo Fungi developed a proprietary technology that enables mushrooms to be grown indoors in a temperature-controlled environment that ensures optimal humidity, lighting and ventilation.

Timothy Goh

It was a rainy Thursday afternoon when I was welcomed into a cosy two-bedroom flat in Pasir Ris.

It seemed like a typical family home preparing for Christmas, but that impression held only until my host, Mr Ryan Ong, showed me how one of the bedrooms was being used.

A bed and an ironing board are the typical items one would expect to find in a spare bedroom, but the 10 sq m space was also taken up by a lab-grade biosafety cabinet, a makeshift humidifier, and a black floor-to-ceiling tent filled with mushrooms bursting out of plastic bags.

I was not expecting what I saw, and this showed on my face.

Mr Ong said: "I guess this is where it all started."

The "it" would be Fogo Fungi, a Singapore-based agritech start-up incorporated in May 2023 of which he is the chief executive and a co-founder.

He and his co-founders, Mr Jonathan Chen, 28, and Mr Felix-Constantin Dörner, 29, started experimenting with growing mushrooms in Mr Chen's spare bedroom in February 2023.

Their tinkering led to the devel-

opment of the company's proprietary technology, which enables mushrooms to be grown indoors in a temperature-controlled environment that ensures optimal humidity, lighting and ventilation.

Fogo Fungi's mushrooms are also grown from a specific blend of food waste and sawdust packed in plastic bags that provides the mycelium, or the root system of a mushroom, with sufficient nutrients to grow.

Mr Ong said the idea for Fogo Fungi came about while he was working as a manager at Cherry-Loft Group, a hospitality chain run by his family.

"I stumbled upon this documentary in 2022 about mushrooms and got so fascinated because, while I know how plants and animals reproduce, I never gave a thought to how mushrooms reproduced," said the 27-year-old.

Inspired, Mr Ong, who did not have prior education in science or agriculture, then set out to gain the necessary technical knowledge by volunteering at a farm in Lim Chu Kang for three months, before working at a food waste management start-up for a year.

He also watched YouTube videos on mushroom cultivation, and consulted experts from South Korea and the United States.

Mr Ong said: "When I worked at

Fun facts about Ryan Ong

- 1 He used to dance ballet when he was a child.
- 2 He had a pet frog for a few years.
- 3 He studied and backpacked in Mexico and Colombia for six months.

the start-up, I would spend every night after work reading up on mushrooms.

"I also asked a lot of questions while working at the start-up, and found out a lot about which nutrients food waste can provide mushrooms."

Most of the mushrooms that Fogo Fungi has produced are lesser-known varieties that stand out for their unique tastes and textures.

Among them are pink oyster mushrooms, which are said to taste like bacon, and lion's mane mushrooms, which have a lobster-like texture and flavour.

Fogo Fungi also sells a DIY Mushroom Grow Kit on its website, priced at \$28, and it has been the firm's main revenue source thus far.

To date, Fogo Fungi has raised about \$200,000 from its founders and their family and friends, with an additional \$80,000 coming from government grants and entrepreneurship programmes like the Singapore Management University (SMU) Business Innovations Generator.

The start-up is in talks to sell its produce to local supermarkets, hotels, cafes and distributors, and is set to move into a 4,000 sq ft production facility in Tuas by the end of 2023 in what is essentially a scaled-up version of the set-up in Mr Chen's spare bedroom.

The new facility will be able to produce roughly two tonnes of mushrooms a month. Fogo Fungi also plans to expand its mushroom line-up from five to 12 varieties by the end of 2024.

Starting and running Fogo Fungi have not been easy, said Mr Ong, who studied business management at SMU.

The start-up has yet to secure any venture capital funding, which means the three founders have to get creative to stretch their resources, sometimes with unexpected consequences.

Mr Ong said they once used a pressure cooker to sterilise a batch of food waste and sawdust, which resulted in a smelly catastrophe.

He said: "It exploded all over the

kitchen, and we had to quickly clean it all up before Jonathan's wife came home."

Once, to save \$10 on delivery, the three of them detached and reattached the bedroom door themselves so that they could get the biosafety cabinet into the bedroom, said Mr Ong.

He added: "It was a frugality thing... As for Jonathan's wife, it was honestly a 'do first and ask for forgiveness later' kind of scenario. We eventually confessed what we did after things became more established."

As for his working hours, Mr Ong said that they are "pretty terrible".

"It's a lot of lifestyle sacrifices, especially when my friends are out for drinks and I'm at home trying to harvest mushrooms," he said, adding that he and his co-founders always joke about how they cannot seem to stop working.

Reflecting on his start-up journey, Mr Ong said he feels a sense of responsibility towards his co-founders. He is also grateful for the support of his family and friends.

He said: "I want to continuously learn and grow while pushing boundaries. I hope that in doing so, my story can inspire other young people to embark on their own entrepreneurship journey."

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