

Cashing in on cafe fever

Founders of new cafes at SMU tell **NOOR AISHA** what's different and unique about their outlets

CAFES are increasingly becoming a popular hangout on campus, and entrepreneurial students and ex-students at the Singapore Management University (SMU) have capitalised on the trend to open more such outlets there.

Recent additions include Treehouse at the SMU's School of Information Systems, and Screme (which replaces the old Fruch) on the campus ground. These cafes join the ranks of Edmund's@SMU, which sells scrumptious cakes, kuihs and pastries at prices easy on the pocket.

Both Treehouse and Screme were set up in August by students, with some help from the SMU Students Association (SMUSA).

"We wanted to increase student vibrancy and have another place for students to hang out," said Elizabeth Lim, a second-year student at the Lee Kong Chian School of Business, who is one of Treehouse's three founders.

Her partners are friends Alicia Yik, also in second year at SMU, and third-year student Desmond Lim.

Treehouse started after the three won an SMUSA competition for cafes with their proposed submissions.

"I think what impressed the judges is that we offered a cafe which also offers the option for students to sit and have a proper meal, as opposed to the usual takeaway style we students are so used to," said Alicia.

This is in contrast to the offer at Screme, located along the SMU Concourse, which focuses on easy-to-eat, American-style food such as sandwiches and bangers-and-mash.

It was tough to get the Treehouse venture started, but the trio say the SMUSA was a great help. It provided furniture for the cafe and other logistics.

It took the team four months of thorough planning during the entire summer holidays before the cafe was up and running in August when the academic term began.

The Treehouse team members tap on one another's skills to maximise their efficiency. For instance, Desmond, who studies accountancy, takes care of the number-crunching,

while the girls play a bigger role in logistics and marketing.

"We focus a lot on mains (dishes)," they say. Signature dishes by their chef, Vasana Lee, include Thai and local delicacies such as mama's green curry, nasi lemak and tom yum soup. Other favourites at the cafe are the desserts, as well as Western dishes such as mushroom spaghetti with white wine and cream sauce.

The cafe is open only during the academic terms, and is closed during the summer and December holidays since students won't be around.

Treehouse is expected to break even in another 1½ to two semesters, an impressive time frame for the startup.

The cafe draws about 100 customers a day, with most coming during lunchtime.

"Ultimately, I think it's the love for what we are doing which keeps us going. If you like

'Ultimately, I think it's the love for what we are doing which keeps us going. If you like what you are doing, you can do anything. Sometimes I even feel like I'm a part-time student and full-time when it comes to the cafe.'

— Alicia Yik

what you are doing, you can do anything," says Alicia. "Sometimes I even feel like I'm a part-time student and full-time when it comes to the cafe."

Isaac Tan, one of the five founders of Screme, agrees. "The unique thing about our cafe is that everyone can make everything," he says.

The team initially had big plans to make gourmet food at affordable prices, but found out that it would not be feasible given their resources and target customers.

"At the end of the day, it is fun (to run a cafe) — we have invested a lot of money and it is all about the valuable experience we get," says Isaac.



Winning proposition: From left, Elizabeth Lim, Alicia Yik and Desmond Lim. The trio started Treehouse at the SMU's School of Information Systems after they won an SMU Students Association competition for cafes with their proposed submissions