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Koi bubble tea, one of the popular brands, sees long queues daily at many of its outlets, like this snaking queue at its Clementi Avenue 3 outlet (above) on a weekday afternoon.

Bubble tea fad makes comeback

Long queues, more variety, more than 500 outlets – and prices have shot up to as high as \$6 a cup

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Ten years since bubble tea became one of the biggest drink fads to hit Singapore, and more than five years after its bubble burst, the curious concoction is back.

Snaking queues and 45-minute waiting times have become regular fixtures at the outlets of at least two popular chains.

Never mind that prices of the drinks – concoctions of flavoured syrup, tea and tapioca balls – have soared to as much as \$6 a pop, fans say the improved variety is what is drawing them back this time.

There are now about 10 chains and more than 500 bubble tea outlets across the island, selling the drinks in an assortment of flavours, with fancy add-ons such as pudding and jelly, as well as customisable features such as sugar levels.

Bubble tea business owners told The Sunday Times that they believe the drink is here to stay this time.

Ms Ma Ya Fen, director of one of the most popular brands here, Koi, said in Mandarin: “Since we entered the Singapore market in 2007, we haven’t done any advertising to create hype. Our customer base was built from people who tried our product and genuinely liked it.”

Koi has eight outlets, many with long queues seen snaking around their shopfronts daily.

A check by The Sunday Times at three Koi outlets on a weekday afternoon yielded an average wait of half an hour.

Bubble tea first gained popularity in Singapore about 10 years ago, with a rash of stalls opening in shopping centres and heartland estates. But the novelty died and demand waned after about three years, with prices at a few remaining outlets plummeting to as low as \$1 a cup.

However, the latest range of bubble tea outlets is drawing the crowds by touting quality and variety as its selling point.

Taiwanese brand Gong Cha first opened in November 2009 and now has 13 outlets here. It claims its tea is freshly brewed every day and each batch is kept for a maximum of four hours.

Said operations director Goh Chee Cheng: “We don’t consider ourselves similar to the cheaper brands of bubble tea because they use mainly powders and syrups in their drinks to drive down costs. Our tea takes a lot more time and effort to prepare.”

Hong Kong brand Happy Lemon, which opened in March last year, counts on wacky flavours, such as a green tea with rock salt and cheese mix, to score with customers.

Said operations manager Wilson Hon: “It is a one-of-a-kind drink that perfectly balances the sweet-and-salty taste. It is one of our top sellers.” He added that 30 to 50 cups of the rock salt and cheese flavour are sold at each outlet daily.

The brand has two outlets and will be opening a third one this month.

Surprisingly, marketing experts say that the higher prices this time round may be the reason for its popularity.

Marketing professor Jin K. Han of the Lee Kong Chian School of Business at the Singapore Management University said: “Often, consumers use price as a cue for quality, hence the reason why lower-priced bubble teas are not selling well may be partly attributable to consumers’ reliance on the price-quality cue in this category.”

Associate Professor Ang Swee Hoon, from the department of marketing at the National University of Singapore’s Business School, said the target group for such a product is the young.

“To them, being cool is important. And often, cool is associated with something that is higher-priced. A \$1.50 drink may not have that hip cool image that they desire.”

Older brands here which have kept their prices low say they do not compromise on quality.

Mr Leslie Mun, operations director of home-grown brand Each-A-Cup, said: “Actually there is no difference in our products, just that we are cheaper. We use the same quality ingredients.”

The brand was set up during the first wave of the

bubble tea fad in 2000, and now has 42 outlets, with its fruit-flavoured teas starting at \$1.50.

He said the brand, which is into its 12th year, relies on regular customers, who are mainly adults in their late 20s to 40s.

Marketing experts say this second spring for bubble tea may, like the first one, not last.

Prof Ang said: “I think it’s a food fad. We’ll see another innovative beverage being introduced in the future and the demand for bubble tea will be affected.”

Freelance copywriter Wang Wei Yang, 25, has never joined in the queue for bubble tea.

“I’ve tried popular brands like Koi when my friends bought them. It’s nice, but definitely not worth the trouble,” he said.

“I would never waste 45 minutes queueing for a drink, nor would I pay \$6 for a cup when there are so many alternatives around.”

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