

Redefining Ugly: How one Singapore-Based startup aims to achieve zero food waste

After researching the health benefits of nutritious food and the waste generated by the world's food systems, Pei Shan set out to find a way to effectively reduce food waste in Singapore.

The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations reports that each year more than 1 billion tonnes of food is wasted. Local startup, UglyFood, has found that foods that are not cosmetically attractive (or "ugly") are often wasted as they are viewed as less desirable to shoppers. The startup's founders saw this as both a business and social-impact opportunity. So far, the business has diverted more than 7,384 perfectly edible fruits and vegetables by transforming them into juices, smoothies and popsicles.

We conducted an interview with UglyFood to learn about the organisation's mission, successes and future goals, as well as to shed light on how other startups can successfully grow their businesses.

When and how did UglyFood begin its operations? What is your company's long-term vision?

Pei Shan, the founder of UglyFood and an SUTD-SMU Double Degree Programme graduate, developed an interest in food four years ago when her grandmother was stricken with cancer. In hopes that fruits and vegetables would alleviate her grandmother's health condition, she started reading about healthier food choices, such as fruit and vegetables, and learned how to make different fruits and vegetables juices. Upon stumbling across a video on Facebook about global food wastage, she then gathered a team to look into the issue of unnecessary food wastage in Singapore.

With her experience in making healthy foods and the awareness that food waste is avoidable and is present in Singapore, she decided to start a social enterprise, UglyFood. Uglyfood's vision is to accelerate the minimization of the impact of food wastage on the rapidly deteriorating health of our planet and the reduction of food-related poor health outcomes.

How Does UglyFood stand out from its competitors?

UglyFood approaches and establishes relationships with stakeholders such as wholesalers, importer, distributors and wet market stall owners to gather fresh produce that would otherwise be wasted. Uglyfood innovates on the recipes we use and always puts the health of our customers as priority.

What else does UglyFood do to be environmentally friendly?

We try as much as possible to use packaging that is less harmful to the environment. For example, for our fruit tea series and our signature cold-press juice series, we use glass bottles that are reused. Also, the fresh produce we take in are ones that would otherwise go to waste. When we transform these fruits and vegetables into appealing, nutritious and delectable food products (fruit teas, cold-pressed juices, and popsicles) for our customers.

How do you measure your business's impact on the society and the environment? How would you rate your progress so far? What are you most proud of, and where could you improve the most?

We measure our impact by the number of fruits and vegetables saved. We have saved around 8,000 pieces of fresh produce since we launched. We believe that there is potential to achieve greater impact as many people are supportive of our work. However, at this point in time, we are not providing sufficient distribution channels for them to access our products.

We are really proud to share that we have finished prototyping a range of cold-pressed juices and are looking into developing more products. Also, we are increasing our distribution channels- launching on delivery platforms like Deliveroo and Food Panda!

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What advice would you give to startups in Singapore in terms of being a successful business with an environmental focus?

Taking into account the additional environmental bottom line is not an easy feat as it takes patience and perseverance to take ideas to implementation and a lot of tweaking and iterations along the way.

We saw that you have a partnership with TreeDots, an organisation that we interviewed recently. Can you tell me more about your partnership and how your organisations are able to assist each other?

We order some fresh produce from TreeDots to make our products. TreeDots assists to coordinate with suppliers and streamline the process of procuring fruits and vegetables. We purchase from their platform.

ValueChampion aims to educate entrepreneurs and small businesses about best business practices, especially about financial topics. With that in mind, we are interested in UglyFood's financial journey. How did your business first obtain funding?

One early milestone was the validation we received from the #SOIMPACT Bootcamp, organised by *SCAPE and UNFRAMED. We raised funds via crowdfunding and emerged as winners. We have also put in some of our own money.

Did your company ever require additional financing (e.g. working capital loan, asset purchase loan, equity, etc.)? If so, why?

So far, we did not require additional funding as we are keeping our assets as low as possible and are bootstrapping. We are doing production in a small allocated relatively unused kitchen space in a restaurant with low rental fee. We bought second hand equipment and use existing equipment within the kitchen. However, moving forward, if we want to increase our presence and distribution channels, we anticipate requiring additional financing for cash reserves and equipment investments.

Did you consider any alternatives to traditional financing, such as crowdfunding? If so, was it helpful? If not, do you think it have been more helpful than the type of financing that you ended up obtaining?

We have tried crowdfunding on GIVE.Asia. It was helpful to get the word out there about the work that we do. We believe that crowdfunding will be effective only through heavy marketing efforts.