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Anyone who has thrown a house party before would probably have received countless bottles of wine as gifts.

Despite soya sauce being a staple in Singapore, few would consider it a “gift-worthy” product.

Ken Koh, the director of homegrown brand Nanyang Sauce, has managed to successfully turn that narrative around in the past three years.

Under his leadership, the 60-year-old company has embarked on a Blue Ocean Strategy — a pursuit of differentiation — and is on an upward trajectory of innovation.

Transforming A 60-Year-Old Business

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Nanyang Sauce was founded by Ken's grandfather, Tan Tiong How, who arrived in Singapore from Fujian in 1942.

He started fermenting his own soya sauce using his grandmother's recipe to add flavour to the plain porridge that he often ate while working as a coolie.

His soya sauce soon become popular among his friends, and the late Tan started selling it door-to-door in 1951.

After years of toiling, he set up the Nanyang Sauce Factory in 1959, which has been running till this day.

The 37-year-old Ken is also quite the entrepreneur himself — he founded a startup in 2005, whilst studying in the Singapore Management University.

After 13 years of running the startup, Ken decided to return to the family business to help out in 2018.

My grandfather was the main driver of the business. After he left us in 1996, the business stopped innovating and was at the status quo for a long time.

I saw how the business stagnated, and I always wanted to come back to help. When you don't innovate, you lose out.

Ken Koh, Director of Nanyang Sauce

Even though his mother was reluctant for him to join the business as she deemed it a "sunset industry", he was set on reinvigorating the brand.

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A Sauce Good Enough To Gift — A First In The Industry



“In the last three years since 2018, we have grown the business and broken new ground with things not done before with sauces,” said Ken.

After going on visits to more than 13 soya sauce breweries around the region, Ken realised that the way Nanyang Sauce produced their sauces was extremely different from other brands out there.

Nanyang Sauce utilises a traditional method of brewing passed down from Ken’s grandfather, and one bottle of sauce takes a whopping nine months to create.

When Ken visited the factories, he was “shocked” that they no longer made soya sauce the same way.

Most factories make use of chemical hydrolysis, and the sauce can be produced in less than a week. Sometimes, it only takes a day.

“We decided there was a key differentiating factor between our sauce and mass produced sauce, and embarked the strategy of gifting,” Ken told Vulcan Post.

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Ken said that although other sauce companies are following suit with gifting, Nanyang Sauce was the first to promote the idea that a commodity like soya sauce could be used as a gift.

Though paying S\$12 to S\$88 for a bottle of sauce might be mind-boggling to some, Ken assures that they are a product of “a labour of love”.

Besides, they are made with only 100 per cent natural non-genetically modified soya beans, and are thus healthier, tastier and of higher quality.

Today, Nanyang Sauce has its own boutique store at South Bridge Road and some of its stockists include Sinpopo Grocer, FairPrice Finest, Unpackt, and RedMart.

The Soya Sauce Academy



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According to Ken, customers are always surprised that Nanyang Sauce uses such a traditional method to brew its sauces.

Thus, Ken created the Sauce Academy in 2018, where he hosts workshops to educate customers on sauce-making and appreciation.

The workshops available range from sauce appreciation, to sauce pairing and sauce making.

The third-generation family business has even secured partnerships with Klook, Airbnb and the Singapore Tourism Board to spread the knowledge about its artisanal sauces.

It is tedious, not easy work, but we are doing our part to make sure that this vanishing craft is not lost.

Just like any craftsman, if we don't share this knowledge with the next generation, it will all be lost one day.

Ken Koh, Director of Nanyang Sauce

In fact, Ken is all about the customer experience.

To allow customers to have a taste of the sauce before buying them, the restaurant Nanyang Chicken was set up.

Nanyang Chicken sells various local favourites, all cooked with Nanyang Sauce.

According to Ken, the various chicken dishes are well received, and he is looking to franchise the brand and grow it into shopping malls.

Building Upon The Legacy Of His Ancestors

Ken's grandfather's vision was to make the best soya sauce in Singapore, and Ken thinks Nanyang Sauce has achieved that.

Seeing his customers enjoying the sauce and appreciating it keeps Ken motivated. However, success to him is also being able to pass down the craft of sauce making.

When his kids grow up — they are aged one and a half, and four respectively — he hopes that they will still be able to see soya sauce being made traditionally.

Now, he has big dreams to build upon his grandfather's legacy, and create the best soya sauce in the world.