

**Publication: Vulcan Post Online**

**Date: 25 August 2022**

**Headline: They invested S\$70K to start an açai-specialty cafe at age 20, now run 12 outlets in S'pore**

**They invested S\$70K to start an açai-specialty cafe at age 20, now run 12 outlets in S'pore**



When Anna Ng and Isabel Lee first met at the Singapore Management University (SMU) six years ago, they immediately hit it off. Beyond being just good friends, they are also now business partners to each other.

“We both share the same passion and interest for healthy eating and health foods, and were always on the lookout for new health trends. We often bonded over açai bowls, but back in 2016, there were not many options and they were often expensive and not of the best quality,” said Isabel, co-founder of An Açai Affair.

“We felt like it was a great product that Singaporeans would potentially enjoy, and it was a waste that not many people knew about it. Hence, we started An Açai Affair with the aim of making açai bowls more affordable and accessible to the masses.”

They started up An Açai Affair, which is now Singapore’s largest açai-specialty cafe, when they were both still in their second year of university. They ran it as a side hustle for the next two years until they graduated in 2019.

Besides internship stints, they did not hold any other corporate jobs so helming this venture is pretty much their first full-time job.

Publication: Vulcan Post Online

Date: 25 August 2022

Headline: They invested S\$70K to start an açai-specialty cafe at age 20, now run 12 outlets in S'pore

Açai was pretty much unknown back then



The fact that açai wasn't exactly popular or trending when they first started up, was a double-edged sword.

They had to ramp up education efforts on açai and its health benefits because most Singaporeans were unfamiliar with it. They also wanted to break the stereotype that healthy food is boring or bland, because açai bowls are actually delicious superfoods.

*During our first one to two years, the main struggle was the lack of product awareness. There was a lot of explaining and educating to do, but we were very happy that most Singaporeans were very open-minded and willing to try this new product.*

*I believe that in the end, the product speaks for itself. People keep coming back because it's so delicious and refreshing, and it has so many health benefits. We mostly used social media to raise brand and product awareness, but we [also] often had to stand outside our stores and give out free samples, speak to potential customers, answer their questions et cetera.*

– Isabel Lee, co-founder of An Açai Affair

Sharing more about açai berries, Isabel explained that they originate from the Amazon forest in Brazil. It's a dense, dark purple berry that resembles a blueberry.

They are rich in antioxidants and neutralise the damaging effects of free radicals throughout the body, and promote graceful ageing. They are also rich in vitamins and minerals, especially calcium and beta-carotene, which promote healthy hair, skin and nails.

To ensure freshness and quality, they work directly with the local communities who wild harvest the açai. Its single-origin açai berries are in fact, handpicked from the region of Cametá, in Pará, Brazil.

**Publication: Vulcan Post Online**

**Date: 25 August 2022**

**Headline: They invested S\$70K to start an açai-specialty cafe at age 20, now run 12 outlets in S'pore**

“We serve organic açai in the purest and least diluted form, free of artificial liquids/sweeteners. This means that our açai bowls have one of the lowest calories and sugars per serving, making it even better for your body,” added Isabel.

### **Innovation is in their DNA**



When they first started in 2016, they only had four açai bowl variations on the menu, but they have since expanded their options to 10.

Both the co-founders work closely in the research and development (R&D) process for their products. They would conduct multiple taste tests and continually tweak it, before they finalise their açai blend.

*The process is very fun because we get to do a lot of taste tests and experimentation with [different] flavours.*

*We are also constantly coming up with new items for the menu/seasonal açai bowls based on new food trends and inspirations we get from different sources. Some examples are blue pea lychee sorbet and pear sorbet.*

– Isabel Lee, co-founder of An Açai Affair

She stressed that it was important for them to constantly innovate their menu so An Açai Affair can retain a strong value proposition, which is to offer unique açai bowl variations that aren't offered elsewhere.

As such, they make a conscious effort to stay on top of food trends to stay relevant, as well as secure collaborations that excite consumers.

These are just some of their business strategies that they stick to in order to stand out from the highly saturated and competitive F&B industry in Singapore.

**Publication: Vulcan Post Online**

**Date: 25 August 2022**

**Headline: They invested S\$70K to start an açai-specialty cafe at age 20, now run 12 outlets in S'pore**

### **They broke even in just eight months**

But at 20 years old, how did the young duo even manage to secure funding to start up?

*We bootstrapped at the beginning, and spent about S\$60,000 to S\$70,000 on the initial renovations, R&D, and start-up costs. We both took a loan from our family members for the initial [investment], and thankfully, we managed to break even and repay them after the first eight months or so.*

– Isabel Lee, co-founder of An Açai Affair

However, finances remain a huge business challenge today, especially with the rising costs. They need to keep their prices affordable, deal with increasing overheads, as well as overcome manpower shortages.

Regardless, business growth has always been good. In 2019, the co-founders, now 26, were nominated for the Spirit of Enterprise Award under the start-up category, which awards young entrepreneurs in the local entrepreneurial scene, which was greatly encouraging to them.

That same year, it was also reported that its flagship store at Katong sold 150 bowls a day on average.



They opened their first outlet at Katong in the fourth quarter of 2016 and have steadily opened two to four new outlets from 2018 to 2022 (except 2019). Its most recent outlet openings are located at Punggol and Robertson Quay, which are launched in the second half of this year.

“Every new outlet that we open is a huge milestone for us. When we first started out, we definitely never expected it to grow to where it is today — 12 outlets and counting!” expressed Isabel.

**Publication: Vulcan Post Online**

**Date: 25 August 2022**

**Headline: They invested S\$70K to start an açai-specialty cafe at age 20, now run 12 outlets in S'pore**

When setting up new outlets, they make it a point to choose an accessible and top-of-mind location, such as popular malls and shophouse stretches.

As they expand and open more outlets, they also ensure that they maintain their standards — in terms of food, customer service and business operations.

In fact, An Açai Affair have had some store closures due to underperformance, such as the outlets at DUO and Telok Ayer. “[We] have to take this in stride and move on,” said Isabel, reflecting their ‘fail fast and move forward’ mindset.

### **A strong growth in delivery orders during COVID**

The COVID-19 pandemic has severely impacted most businesses, particularly those in the F&B sector.

Thankfully, they were not heavily affected by the dine-in restrictions as their business is “very grab-and-go”, relying mostly takeaways and delivery orders.

“The only time we were affected was during the closure of dessert establishments mandated by the government [during the circuit breaker period], but thankfully, most of our landlords were rather helpful with rental relief and rebates.

During this lockdown period, they also started introducing islandwide delivery, and hired riders and drivers whose jobs were affected to deliver their products. At the same time, they also temporarily opened in two cloud kitchens at Tampines and Clementi to better manage their growing delivery orders.



*Over the years, we've expanded steadily along with the growth of the açai industry in Singapore. I would say more and more Singaporeans eat açai regularly now, and it's become a staple food in their diets.*

*And those who don't eat it regularly have at least heard of it, or tried it at least once. It's a very different scene compared to five years ago, when probably only one or two out of 10 Singaporeans have heard of it.*

*– Isabel Lee, co-founder of An Açai Affair*

**Publication: Vulcan Post Online**

**Date: 25 August 2022**

**Headline: They invested S\$70K to start an açai-specialty cafe at age 20, now run 12 outlets in S'pore**

As An Açai Affair continues to grow, the founders definitely have overseas expansion on its business map. This is something they've been thinking about even before the pandemic hit.

"We've set our sights on countries like Indonesia, Thailand and the Philippines, where we definitely have potential to grow," said Isabel. "Anna and I are also constantly on the lookout for other business opportunities, [even beyond the F&B space]."