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Unlike some young folks who hang out with their pals or dabble with TikTok in their free time, Indonesia-born sisters Rachel (middle), 21, and Mikaela Maswi (left), 19, run their own café when they're not at school. Currently studying at the Singapore Institute of Management and Temasek Polytechnic respectively, the duo opened modern Indonesian eatery Three by Garamika with eldest sis Gabrielle (right), 24, a fresh graduate, at an HDB block in Toa Payoh late January. The cafe is just a few doors down from soy sauce chicken specialist Lee Fun Nam Kee.

They named it Three as it's started by the three siblings, while Garamika is a portmanteau of their names. It is also the name of their parents' student accommodation business.

Originally from Bogor, south of Jakarta, the family relocated to Singapore in 2007 and are now naturalised citizens. The family's food biz serves oxtail dishes like oxtail soup, fried oxtail, as well as Indonesian favourites like gado gado and grilled chicken rice.

They decided to specialise in oxtail as the sisters grew up loving their mum's oxtail dishes. "We like it and can cook it well. Also, not many places in Singapore offer it," shares Gabrielle.

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### Juggling school and business

The past couple of weeks have been hectic to say the least, especially for Rachel, the eatery's resident cook and mastermind of this biz venture. She goes into the café daily at 8am to prep and cook, and on some days, would rush to SIM where she's studying for a degree in Economics and Finance from the University of London, for lectures when the eatery is shut between 3pm to 6pm. She then hits the books again after work.

"On certain days when I can't make it for class, my friend will help to mark attendance for me," she laughs. "My lecturers are very understanding. I was very honest with them and told them I am opening a café 'cos they like to call on me to answer questions. They'd know if I'm not present."

The café is closed on Mondays and Wednesdays when Rachel has a full day of school.

"Sometimes I find myself thinking about math, algebra and econs in the kitchen. It's great fun but stressful," she quips.

Gabrielle runs the front of house, while Mikaela handles marketing and helps out at the café when she is free.

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Not just a flighty idea

Rachel has always enjoyed tinkering in the kitchen and cooking with her mum. She tells us it's been her dream since primary school to open a restaurant and she began honing her cooking skills when she was studying an international foundation course in Scotland in 2020. She was so passionate about starting her own F&B biz that she convinced her sisters to join her and took a \$150K loan from their parents to open shop.

But with just one more year of uni to go, why rush into business?

"I want to create the foundation, so when I graduate next year, I can focus on expanding the business," she explains.

The timing was also perfect for Gabriella, who had just graduated from the Singapore Management University with a double degree in Accountancy and Psychology in December.

"I was planning to get a job in risk advisory, but Rachel was so convincing that I decided to lend her my support 'cos we all have different skill sets," she says.

"By title, I am in charge of finance and operations, Rachel is the chef, and Mika is in charge of marketing. Mum is the CEO, chief emotional officer."

Mum, Hartaty Maswi, 51, also doubles up as the cook when Rachel is too busy with school.

"At the end of the day, this is our family business so if Rachel really cannot cope, we can just do one [meal] service. And when we sell out, we sell out. It's okay. Don't need to stress ourselves out," she says.

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Keeping in theme with the brand

Decked out in wood and neutral hues, the sisters wanted the 25-seater café to be a cosy “hub where people can gather over homely food”. It might not be obvious but the furnishings were carefully picked to reflect the oxtail theme and café name.

“We chose this chair ‘cos the wooden part looks like an ox horn and picked this table to match it,” shares Gabrielle.

They decided to set up their eatery in Toa Payoh as their parents run their student accommodation business in the shop unit upstairs.



The menu

The café offers four oxtail dishes: traditional oxtail soup, rawon (Indonesian-style beef soup) oxtail soup, as well as deep-fried and grilled oxtail. Other mains are gado gado, chicken soup with bean curd skin, grilled and fried chicken. Prices range from \$10.50 for gado gado to \$17.50 for fried oxtail with rice or fries.

Dessert of the day, which is either banana fritters, fruit pudding or kolak pisang, a bubur cha cha-like dessert with banana, costs \$3.50.

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Traditional Oxtail Soup, \$16.50

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This clear oxtail soup, also known as sop buntut in Indonesia, is the bestseller. It's based on mum Hartaty's recipe, with some tweaks. Instead of simmering it over the stove, Rachel cooks her soup in the oven.

"I needed an efficient way of cooking a large amount of soup, so I came up with the idea to make it in the oven. With this method, I can just leave it to slowly braise for long hours [without burning quickly] so the flavour is richer," says Rachel.

Fresh oxtail is seared with a blend of aromatics like onion and garlic before being braised in spices like cloves, cinnamon, and nutmeg for almost a day to bring out its flavours and tenderise the meat. The savoury soup, which comes with at least two chunks of meaty oxtail, carrots and potatoes, is fragrant and more robust compared to other sop buntuts we've tried. We like that it isn't too oily and the flavourful fall-off-the-bone oxtail is a win. Add \$1.50 for rice.



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Rawon Oxtail Soup, \$16.50 (8 DAYS Pick!)

However, we prefer the rawon oxtail soup, which has a darker broth. Similarly, oxtail is seared then braised in the oven. The only difference is the addition of lemongrass, Indonesian bay leaves and turmeric powder, which amp up the flavour. Traditionally, rawon is cooked with buah keluak but Rachel omits it from her recipe — so don't expect the real thing here.

But we still enjoy this soup, which is richer than the plain oxtail version. It's redolent of cinnamon, cloves and lemongrass and loaded with bean sprouts and a hard-boiled egg. Pity the accompanying tangy sambal ijo (green sambal) had nary a hint of spice.

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Fried Oxtail, \$17.50 (8 DAYS Pick!)

Not an Indonesian dish, but Rachel's own creation. Braised oxtail chunks are coated in a batter of flour, baking soda, salt and pepper, and deep-fried till golden. The combination of the thin, crisp, umami crust with the tender, gelatinous oxtail is delish and decadent. Very yummy. Served with keropok, traditional oxtail soup, and your choice of rice or fries.

"I love fried food and can eat it every day, so one day I decided to fry the braised oxtail from our oxtail soup. It took me five months to perfect the recipe and get it to the crispiness that I want." shares Rachel.

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Grilled Chicken, \$12.50

There are some chicken dishes too for those who don't take beef. This grilled chicken, marinated in kecap manis (sweet soy sauce), minced garlic, onion, and ginger, is succulent and tender. The chook boasts a slight smokiness mingled with the sweet flavours of the marinade. Pretty good.

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Gado Gado, \$10.50

Steamed veggies like shredded carrots, long beans, cabbage, kang kong, and beans sprouts are drenched in a luscious, chunky peanut dressing. The creamy sauce, made with ground roasted peanuts, tamarind, and chilli isn't too sweet. Together with the crispy keropok and tangy sambal, the salad has a nice balance of flavours and textures.

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Bottom line

Three by Garamika serves wholesome traditional Indonesian oxtail soups but the star here is the decadent deep-fried oxtail. For a café, their prices are pretty decent given the quality and portions of the food. Extra points for charging five per cent service charge instead of 10.

Photos: Three by Garamika, 8days.sg

Three by Garamika is at 01-22, 94 Lorong 4 Toa Payoh, S310094. Open daily except Mon & Wed 11am -3pm; 6pm-9pm. Tel: 8027 1333 More info on Website and Instagram.