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During Singapore's circuit breaker in 2020, Maribelle Seah wanted to send her boyfriend a cake for his birthday as they were unable to meet. While searching online for design inspiration for the cake she was baking, the founder of BerryBar stumbled onto the world of chocolate-covered strawberries.

"I was amazed and intrigued by how a small piece of fruit could be transformed into so many different characters," she said.

She made some chocolate-covered strawberries to decorate the cake and then thought: "Chocolate-covered strawberries are very popular and common in Europe and America, but not so much in Singapore. So I thought, why not?"

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Seah, who had no baking background and did not even know how to use a piping bag, asked her mother if she could borrow her baking equipment. And just like that, she started BerryBar, then a home business selling chocolate-covered strawberries, or chocoberries, in different designs.

Seah uses strawberries from the USA, South Korea and Australia, depending on where she can find the sweetest seasonal fruit.

Her chocoberries, which start at \$40 for a box of six, to \$143 for a box of 24, come in fun designs like Minions and Star Wars characters, and even cheeky R-rated “fancy bits”, as one of their customers described BerryBar’s popular Netflix & Chill box.

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Besides chocolate-covered strawberries, her other signature item is cocoa bombs – round chocolate shells filled with marshmallows and your choice of oats or powdered Milo, or coffee, matcha or Horlicks. Pour hot milk or water over it to make your beverage. These start from S\$50 for a box of four. All prices include free delivery.

Her chocolate treats began catching the attention of corporate clients, including Netflix, Deutsche Bank, Twilio and Pomellato, and she eventually opened a bricks-and-mortar chocolate boutique at Kensington Square.

BerryBar has done so well that Seah is currently expanding her business in Dubai, where she relocated in October with her boyfriend for his job in shipping.

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Originally wanted to be police officer

Making chocolate-coated strawberries is a far cry from Seah's original career goals. She had studied psychology at the Singapore Management University because she wanted to become a police officer.

"It always surprises people when I tell them, because I'm very petite," said the 1.53m who loves true crime documentaries and crime movies. However, while she enjoyed learning psychology, she realised that she did not necessarily want a career in it.

Her first job was in human resource management and she eventually became a full-time recruiter for renewable power projects in the region. But she did not feel fulfilled in either role and, at 24, had no idea what she wanted to do.

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After making her first chocoberries for her boyfriend, she realised how much she enjoyed creating edible pieces of art – and more importantly, how there was a gap in the market that she could plug.

“Traditionally, chocolate-covered strawberries have been reserved as romantic gifts for women, from men,” she said.

The chocolate lover wanted to explore a different angle – for women to buy them as gifts for their girlfriends, beyond the usual flowers, bento cakes and cupcakes. “If I was feeling this way, I was sure there would be others like me with the same dilemma.”

BerryBar was meant to be a side project while Seah continued with her recruitment career for at least a year. Two months in, she realised that she had to make a choice.

“It was not sustainable for me to juggle both. I realised that I was more excited, felt happier and more fulfilled about BerryBar and so the choice was easy.”



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Her parents were not supportive at first, preferring her to have a stable salaried job. Her father, who runs a car dealership, knew how hard it was to build a company and did not want her to go through the same stress.

Still, Seah persisted. "I did not have any student, housing or car loans then, nor any dependents, so I thought it was 'now or never' if I wanted to try and start something."

She gave up her commission-based recruiter job, where she made from \$3,000 to \$5,000 in a good month, and started working from home in July 2020. "It took a year before my parents warmed up to the idea that maybe I was on to something that could be good," recalled Seah. Her mum also began helping her on busy days.

When word spread and corporate interest poured in, Seah decided to rent a shop space at Kensington Square and hire her first team member in October 2021. She now has a five-man team, including a business partner who does BerryBar's branding and business development.

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Minions berries vid blew up on Instagram

Her first design was simple stripes but Seah now draws inspiration from everywhere, from social media to YouTube. Her favourite design is the Minions, which blew open doors when her Instagram reel on it garnered 1.5 million views. It brought her a new clientele – children – and inspired a range of designs for kids.

Among her most memorable orders was a proposal box with 'Will You Marry Me?' on the berries. Seah personally delivered it because she wanted to be sure that everything was perfect for the couple. "They tagged us on Instagram (she said yes!) and we were all so thrilled for them!"

For Christmas this year, she designed cute penguins wearing scarves, snowmen, reindeer and a jolly Santa. Her busiest season is December, when her Christmas orders are packed from November till the end of the year.

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“Naughty” strawberries ordered by one guy for two different girls

Seah’s occasion boxes run from sweet birth announcements to raunchy bachelorette parties. These “very naughty boxes” of chocoberries are decorated with chocolate private parts, made with moulds she shipped from overseas.

“We thought people were only ordering it for bachelorette parties but we’ve had ladies sending it to each other for a laugh!” A box starts from \$60 for six berries, including delivery.

Last Valentine’s Day, BerryBar created two options for lovers. Option 1 featured sweet messages like ‘Will you be my Valentine?’. The other had a “Netflix and chill” message, complete with raunchy decorations like a lingerie-clad buttock.

The most interesting part? “A customer ordered these two different boxes for two different girls. He put in both orders back-to-back – and that was how we realised that it was from the same guy,” laughed Seah.



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Operating S'pore store from Dubai

When Seah and her boyfriend, Englishman Michael Havens, first started dating in Singapore, they knew he'd move to Dubai at some point. So from the start, she planned on building a brand that would work overseas.

Now that she has relocated to Dubai, she leaves her Singapore operations to her staff, and checks in daily. The time difference – Dubai is four hours behind Singapore – works in her favour. By 7pm or 8pm Dubai time, most in Singapore would be asleep and she now has the evening to clear her mind and not think of the business.

Feeling more rested has helped her to set two key goals for 2024: To expand the team in Singapore, and start BerryBar Dubai.

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The business has come a long way but it took Seah a long time to give herself credit for it. “Now, I am proud of my persistence and resilience, for sticking out the tough times. As a first-time entrepreneur with no background in business or pastries, I really threw myself off the deep end. I had every opportunity at any stage to bow out but I chose to push through,” she said.

For more info, visit <https://www.berrybar.sg/>

The original version of this story first appeared in CNA Lifestyle.

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