

## Singaporean barista's bid to be a world champ



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Barista Courtney Kheng, who will represent Singapore in the World Barista Championship in Busan, South Korea, in May.  
ST PHOTO: JASON QUAH

There will be many cupping sessions to find the perfect competition beans. There will be sleuthing to find out what kinds of milk are available in South Korea, and which one will work best with the beans. There will be a lot of yoga, meditation and running, to build mental resilience and physical fitness. There will be countless revisions to the script. There will be hours and hours, months and months, of practice.

Barista Courtney Kheng's 2024 is shaping up to be a grueling one.

Her aim: To be the first Singaporean barista to make it to the finals of the 2024 World Barista Championship in Busan, South Korea. And, of course, to win it.

Ms Kheng, 30, quit her job in human resources in 2018 to become a coffee professional.

The Singapore Management University graduate, who has a bachelor's degree in business management and a double major in human resources and psychology, used to work at Raffles City. She tells The Sunday Times that she would always try to find a place to get coffee at after

lunch. One of those places was The Glasshouse, then located at Chijmes.

She says: "The coffee was well-priced and good. I made friends with all the baristas there. They surprised me because at the time, out of all the cafes I'd visited, they were the only ones who interacted with and got to know their customers.

"That sparked something in me. I wanted to be a part of that – giving and showing warmth and hospitality. I wasn't enjoying what I was doing, and they (Glasshouse) were hiring part-timers, so I decided to join them."

In 2018, she got roped in to assist her then boss during a brewers' competition at Marina Bay Sands. Making coffee is a big part of it, but a compelling narrative, such as information about the beans and how the drinks showcase the beans, among other things, is equally important. Contestants also have to show the judges that they are coffee professionals who have command over their presentation and coffee.

In barista competitions, competitors present an espresso shot, an

espresso drink with milk, and a signature drink. They have to make four of each drink, a total of 12. In 15 minutes. While talking.

Watching her boss in action at that competition, she says, was eye-opening.

"I was backstage and felt so inspired," she adds. "The competitors challenged themselves to go beyond their comfort zone to deliver an exceptional experience. I wanted to be like them."

The part-time job became a full-time one. She went on to work for Apartment Coffee, and now works for Glyph Supply Co, a coffee roaster which runs Dough, a bakery-cafe in Chijmes; and Runes, a cafe at Biopolis.

Nine months after quitting her job to go into coffee, she took part in her first Singapore National Barista Championship in 2019. The annual competition is organised by The Singapore Coffee Association.

She did not make it to the finals in that attempt, but kept trying. In 2022, she placed third. In 2023, she came out on top.

With that win, she will represent Singapore in May at the World Barista Championship in Busan, or-

ganised by the Specialty Coffee Association, which represents coffee professionals worldwide.

Her employers, she says, are supportive of her effort. But along with all the preparation, she will need to find sponsors to fund her bid. She estimates it will cost \$50,000 in all. She has approached equipment companies and other coffee-related businesses to raise the money.

With the world watching her in Busan, she cannot afford to falter.

"I try to analyse every single routine of the finalists in previous years," she says. "Even the routines of the ones who were knocked out in the first round, to see what went wrong."

Two weeks before the competition, which runs from May 1 to 4, she will be in Busan for the final preparations – sourcing the milk she will use and practising her routine.

"It's incredible to think about how you prepare for half a year, and it's over in 15 minutes," says Ms Kheng, who is single. "If I work hard and work smart, I have a good chance."