

# YOUNG HAWKERS STAY THE COURSE

The going may be tough, but these food entrepreneurs not only survived, but some also grew during the pandemic



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One often reads reports on social media of youngsters joining the hawkers trade. But it is also not uncommon to find them giving up their stalls within a year or two.

Among them is the Mian Zhuang ban mian stall in Hong Lim Market & Food Centre that was opened in 2019 by Mr Jonathan Chng and Ms Vanessa Ong, who are in their 20s. It closed in November 2021, with the owners citing heavy losses.

Another is 21-year-old Delonix Tan, who opened SanDai fishball noodles at Amoy Street Food Centre in 2020, but was forced to close a few months later when Covid-19 hit business in the Central Business District badly. He now runs a stall in Kim Keat Palm Market selling fresh fishballs that he makes by hand.

Restaurant and hotel chefs who joined the trade, too, have realised that life as a hawker, in a time of rising electricity and food costs, is no bed of roses.

Take, for example, Ms Kerene Cheng, 47, the former dim sum chef of Shang Palace who opened Cheong Fan Paradise in the canteen of an Ang Mo Kio industrial park in April 2021. Despite drawing long queues, she closed the stall in May 2022, citing manpower problems.

Former Naked Finn head chef Kek Wan Fong, 40, started a fish soup stall called Qing Feng Yuan in Tiong Bahru Market & Food Centre in June 2021 with a partner, but it is now back at the upscale seafood restaurant in Gillman Barracks. His former partner still runs the stall.

But there are some young hawkers who joined the trade a few years ago and managed to stay the course, despite the tough working conditions and long hours, as well as the many uncertainties caused by the pandemic.

Some, like Old Amoy Chendol's Zhao Younging, 36, and Ashes Burnt's Farhan Zaimuddin, 29, say Covid-19 was a turning point for them as it forced them to seek out new ways of reaching customers and expand to new markets.

Providing islandwide delivery also allowed Mr Farhan to see where his main customer bases were. Along with Carrot Cube's Claire Huang, 34, and One Prawn & Co's Gwyneth Ang, 29, they share their stories on how they make their mark as young hawkers despite the adversities.

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## King of chendol

**ZHAO YOUNING, 36**  
**Old Amoy Chendol**  
Five outlets, including the first at 02-008 Chinatown Complex Food Centre, 335 Smith Street  
**Open:** 10.30am to 6pm (Mondays to Thursdays and Saturdays), 10.30am to 4.40pm (Fridays). Closed on Sundays

When Mr Zhao Younging returned to Singapore in 2007 after living in China for six years, he had no idea he would end up being a hawker. It all started with a craving for a good bowl of chendol.

He was enjoying a career as a model when an assignment took him to Shenzhen, where he ended up living and starting a water filtration business.

At 31, his mother asked him to come home. Back in Singapore, he recalls he wanted to eat chendol one day, but could not find one to his liking.

"Most stalls used processed coconut milk or put in kidney beans instead of red beans. And the chendol had artificial green colouring and flavouring," he says. "What had happened to the traditional dessert scene in Singapore? There must be a market for a traditional chendol."

"I saw a business opportunity and decided to start Old Amoy Chendol and create a bowl of traditional chendol by making it with pandan, sourcing good palm sugar and selling it at an affordable price."

It helped that Mr Zhao, who is single, had a ready recipe. His grandfather used to sell the iced dessert in Amoy Street in the 1950s. That legacy also inspired the name for his first stall in the Chinatown Complex Food Centre, which he opened in November 2017.

He made everything from

scratch and sold his chendol for \$2. Along the way, he also tweaked his product and sourced for better ingredients.

That includes the palm sugar he uses, which he stresses is not gula melaka because he is not happy with the quality of the Malaysian product available. Instead, he buys it directly from small farms in Thailand and Indonesia and cooks the syrup over a charcoal fire.

"I can't serve something to my customers just because it's easy to access, but what about the brand name and trust? So I went to farms around South-east Asia until I found the taste that I wanted," he says.

He is also resolute that he will sell just chendol and nothing else. Instead of a business plan, he says he had only one goal in mind when he started and has not wavered from it since.

"It was just to create a stall to serve affordable traditional chendol made fresh daily and preserve

a true Singapore dessert. Instead of having many items on the menu, I want to make it straightforward and customers would know that we serve only this traditional dessert."

Business grew enough for Zhao to expand to a second outlet in Alexandra Village by December 2020. He opened his first stall in a mall at the Food Republic food-court in Westgate in December 2021. Now, he has five outlets, including in Punggol and the Food Republic at Wisma Atria.

Expanding was not without challenges, Mr Zhao says, because he sold the dessert at \$2, whether it was in a hawker centre or shopping centre. He increased the price to \$2.50 at the beginning of 2022 because of rising costs.

The profit margin is only about 20 per cent, he says, after paying rental, conservancy, utilities, staffing and food costs. "We earn in terms of cents," he adds.

He says he will always remain in hawker centres because they

## Queen of prawn noodles

**GWYNETH ANG, 29**  
**One Prawn & Co**  
458 MacPherson Road  
**Open:** 11am to 9pm (Tuesdays to Sundays). Closed on Mondays

After graduating with a Culinary Institute of America (CIA) degree at the Singapore Institute of Technology in 2015, Ms Gwyneth Ang joined the kitchen of Michelin-starred restaurant Burnt Ends, embarking on an accelerated career track that many of her culinary school classmates coveted. Within three years, she became the head chef of Level Up, a casual bistro bar.

But she could not see herself continuing down that path. "I realised I should be cooking my own food and developing my own voice," says Ms Ang, who is single.

She decided to use her skills as a fine-dining chef to elevate hawker food and picked prawn noodles. "I felt I can do a lot with prawn noodles compared with what is available on the market. For example, the prawn flavour can be drawn out more. I saw a gap I could fill. I never saw being a hawker as being the lower end of the spectrum."

So, together with a fellow CIA graduate in his 20s, who prefers to remain anonymous, she opened a hawker stall in Golden Mile Food Centre in 2019 called One Prawn Noodle. The name was inspired by her ambition to offer the No. 1 prawn noodles in Singapore.

But she did not know how to market her product. There was also the problem of her pricing. Starting at \$5 a bowl, the stall became known for selling "expensive prawn noodles" in Golden Mile Food Centre. But she was not making any money, she says, because her ingredient costs ate up 60 per cent of the price.

"Trying to make a better dish for them to market themselves. When dining-in was not allowed, social media platforms like Facebook and Instagram became abuzz with hawker food deliveries and One Prawn Noodle tapped that."

"It was a reset for everybody," Ms Ang recalls of the time. "Taxi drivers were taking on fixed-rate trips for islandwide delivery and that was how I could send out my noodles at a flat rate. I got a lot of sales because of that. These kinds of logistics were unheard of before Covid-19 because delivery platforms like Deliveroo and foodpanda delivered only to surrounding areas."

The spike in business helped her to realise the bigger goal in



Ms Gwyneth Ang wanted to cook the best prawn noodles she could, so she did not stint on the quality of the ingredients used. ST PHOTO: GIN TAY

her mind. In January, she rented a coffee shop in MacPherson Road, forking out \$300,000 to set up an open kitchen, equipped with factory-level appliances that allow her and her business partner to fry lard and braise pork ribs in large amounts.

The business was rebranded as One Prawn & Co because they intend to introduce other dishes to the menu. It now sells ngoh hiang, which is sourced from a supplier. Ang and her partner plan to introduce grilled seafood for dinner next.

She says her hours are now better as she can leave the running of the shop to her staff. They now have three people helping in the kitchen and four to man the cashier, take orders and serve. She and her partner come in during the late afternoon as they are part of the dinner crew, but if any staff member is sick, they help out during lunch too.

Ms Ang has also been refining her prawn noodle recipe over the years and says she nailed it just before they moved.

She confesses that she used to have a problem with the broth, which would turn dark and change flavour when left on the fire for more than two hours. The solution she arrived at is to keep

the soup in a bain-marie, a heated water bath used in French cooking. She also tweaked her sambal to be milder and pair better with the noodles.

Her efforts did not go unnoticed. One Prawn & Co was listed under the Bib Gourmand in the 2022 Michelin Guide announced in July.

Moving into the coffee shop, which is run like a full-service restaurant albeit without air-conditioning, allowed Ms Ang to raise her prices to a minimum of \$8 a bowl. But despite the shop being packed, she and her partner lost \$20,000 in the first two months. "Food costs were going up every week, it was scary. Such a thing was unheard of before."

They also had to fork out staff salaries for the first time. Now, the noodles are priced at \$14 a bowl, with food costs constituting 30 per cent, which is standard in the food and beverage industry.

"I increased the price not because I moved to a bigger outlet, but I adjusted it to where it was supposed to be. I had been underpricing myself for the longest time," she says.

But no more, she says, as she intends to be in the prawn noodle business for the long haul.