

# Two daring adventurers

## How chicken rice hawker and technopreneur weathered the storm

A young hawker ends up in New York cooking chicken rice. A start-up founder sees opportunity amid the Big Tech rout – a tale of two Singaporeans riding the turbulent waves of 2022 into a better 2023.



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The year 2022 brought much turbulence to people all over the world – war in Ukraine, global inflation, a rout in Big Tech, job losses, severe weather events, general disruption to lives. This was even as many countries learnt to live with the Covid-19 pandemic, re-opening borders, easing health and social distancing restrictions.

As I pondered the events of the year, I wondered how two major disturbances had affected people I had interviewed and featured in these pages. How did the Malaysian chicken export ban affect Lim Wei Keat, the young hawker apprentice who had opened his own chicken rice stall in 2022? And how has the cryptocurrency debacle affected Ng Yi Ming, the founder of a start-up in the blockchain field?

### FROM APPRENTICE TO 'HAWKER HERO' IN NEW YORK

Lim Wei Keat is only 27, but no stranger to how global events can upend his career plans.

I first met Wei Keat in November 2020, when he was an apprentice to chicken rice hawker Neo Cheng Leong, whose Uncle Leong chicken rice stall in Shunfu Mart was dubbed among Singapore's top five best chicken rice stalls in a Straits Times article in 2019.

When I caught up with him this week, he was in New York



running a chicken rice stall in a Singapore-style food centre.

The story of how he moved from a hawker centre in the heartland to a food hall in New York City is about resilience and flexibility, and is the stuff of dreams.

Back in 2020, when I first met him at Uncle Leong's chicken rice stall, Wei Keat had just completed a degree course in culinary arts management with the prestigious Culinary Institute of America (CIA), which had a joint programme with the Singapore Institute of Technology.

He had an offer to intern at a two-star Michelin restaurant in New York and had his bags packed and visa all ready, when Covid-19 struck. Borders closed, and he stayed put in Singapore. After some thought, he decided to go back to basics to focus on local food, and signed up with a National Environment Agency (NEA) programme to train young hawkers. The programme included a two-month internship with a hawker mentor, who was Uncle Leong.

Even at that time, Wei Keat was

quite clear that learning to cook a local heritage dish like chicken rice – and running a hawker stall as a business – was what he wanted to do. He told me then that Singaporeans should recognise hawkers as craftsmen with artisanal skills. "People ask me, you have a degree, why do you want to be a hawker? You can work in a Michelin-starred restaurant. So the first thing is to remove the social stigma of being a hawker."

After completing the NEA programme and apprenticeship, he started his own chicken rice stall in January 2022, in Bukit Merah Central. The stall had a young vibe. The poached white chicken rice taste was traditional, but with an updated twist – an onsen egg could be added, not the traditional braised egg.

Business was just building up over the months when Malaysia imposed a sudden ban on chicken exports. Overnight, there were no more daily fresh chicken supplies coming to Singapore. Local chicken rice is poached, not roasted, and chicken rice lovers used to the silky smooth flesh of

fresh chicken are unforgiving of the tougher texture that comes with frozen chicken. Many chicken rice stalls either closed, sold just roast chicken rice, or pivoted to other food items.

Wei Keat switched to selling Japanese curry chicken rice, using frozen chicken. But it was a struggle, as many regular customers in the Bukit Merah estate were elderly folk used to familiar fare. He also found it hard to hire helpers for his stall. So when a surprise phone call came around June 2022, offering him a job in New York to run and manage a chicken rice stall, he jumped at the opportunity.

Today, Wei Keat is managing the chicken rice stall at Hainan Jones, one of 11 Singapore food stalls at Urban Hawker, a Singapore-style food court in New York, near Times Square. The food court, which opened in September, is the brainchild of Singapore food entrepreneur KF Seetoh in partnership with US-based Urbanspace, a food hall operator promising "immersive" dining concepts, with outlets across America.

For Wei Keat, the work involved in cooking Singapore chicken rice is the same, whether in Shunfu, Bukit Merah or New York. Prepare the chicken, which includes plucking stray feathers by hand. Put in salt water solution. Poach. Submerge in cold water. Chop and debone the chicken. Repeat the process.

But adaptation is necessary – for example, the water is colder in New York, so the time taken to soak the chicken is shorter. The sauces and chilli recipes are also modified, to take advantage of local ingredients.

The biggest difference, says Wei Keat, is having a team to work with. In Bukit Merah, he did the food prep and cooking alone, with his mother or brother sometimes helping to serve customers. At Urban Hawker, there is a team of 10 staff from all over the world: Bangladesh, Colombia, Dominican Republic, Indonesia, Puerto Rico and Senegal.

"I try to understand their culture. I've also picked up some broken Spanish/French/Mandarin. Sometimes the other colleagues help me to translate

and convey my message. The biggest and steepest learning curve for myself is to manage such a huge team. It comes to a point where how well I cook does not matter, but how I work on my people management skills."

He adds that the team has pulled together well, just three months after operations began. He notes: "They have learned how to cook both juicy and tender roasted and poached chickens, despite not having tasted chicken rice before. They can use a cleaver proficiently to debone chicken – including chicken wing tips!"

Work begins at 7.30am and ends only around 8pm. "As a team, we wake up very early, always on time to hustle together. It's bonded teamwork, as we need to serve huge crowds throughout the day for lunch and dinner. The team-mates are curious and take the initiative to learn, always taking the chicken to debone or chop, and helping and guiding each other."

The US\$7-a-dish (\$\$23) chicken rice sells out daily and draws the longer queues in the food hall, of up to half an hour. A report by CNA Lifestyle quoted one Singaporean diner saying it's "the best chicken rice I had outside of Singapore", while another Singaporean said he "had to hold back tears" as he "gobbled down the poached chicken".

Asked why he picked Wei Keat to run the stall, Mr Seetoh says he had been keeping track of the man's exploits, which were featured in the media. He also appreciates Wei Keat's strengths: "He's CIA trained, hence knows operational procedures. He has a knack for local food and even opened his own stall in Bukit Merah. We sensed he was aspiring to bigger things in the arena, so we reached out, and he signed on, knowing full well the big picture behind going to New York City – which is about being a soldier of Singapore food culture and taking it as far as we can."

Mr Seetoh has been championing hawker food for decades, long before it became faddish worldwide, and way before Singapore's hawker culture attained Unesco recognition as an intangible cultural heritage in December 2020.

To sustain hawker culture, he says, the trade has to attract young hawkers. Wei Keat, at 27, and Alan Chong, hawker-owner of Prawnaholic prawn noodles at 26, are the youngest of the 11 head chefs helming the 11 Singapore food stalls at Urban Hawker.

Says Mr Seetoh of Wei Keat: "He is young, and we need them to champion this culture – be a hero hawker of sorts to a new generation wondering what this industry can do and what it has in store for them."

As for Wei Keat himself, he reflects that he had wanted to work in New York, but the pandemic had ended that plan. He had also wanted to develop artisanal cooking skills in a local dish and promote hawker food, but the chicken export ban created obstacles.

Yet, now he finds himself doing both. In a Zoom call late on Christmas Day from a freezing cold New York, he tells me: "Being

CONTINUED ON PAGE B2

## Finding opportunity in diversity

FROM B1

here in New York, and cooking chicken rice, and promoting Singapore's hawker food – this combines everything I wanted. It's like killing two birds with one stone. I don't know if it's good karma or what, but life finds a way to give you what you want."

### WHEN THE CRYPTO BUST TURNED OUT TO BE GOOD FOR BLOCKCHAIN START-UP STACKUP

As the bitcoin bubble burst, culminating in the meltdown of major cryptocurrency exchange FTX amidst fraud investigations, my mind turned to Ng Yi Ming, a young man I had met a few times, who heads a blockchain-based start-up. I had featured him in an article earlier this year on young Singaporeans. How were his companies faring, I wondered.

Quite well, as it turns out. Yi Ming, now 31, co-founded Tribe with polytechnic friend Ryan Chew. It pairs tech talent skilled in blockchain-based technology, especially developers,

with companies in need of such skills. Tribe also operates Tribe Accelerator, a Singapore Government-backed programme

to support the growth of blockchain talents and technical innovation.

Last year, the team at Tribe developed StackUp, which, according to its website "enables developers to level up, grow and connect with a global Dev community – all while being rewarded for their time". Dev refers to technical developers – people who design or build functional software to get something done.

Over tea at a Joo Chiat cafe this week, he explains what it does, and how the year has turned out for his start-up.

"2022 has been good. As for 2023, I would say I am cautiously optimistic. We focus on talent, and are growing an ecosystem of software developers. Talent is needed through all business cycles, through the ups and downs. Last year, when tech was booming, obviously demand for talent was very strong. This year, as tech scaled down, we see many tech talents wanting to retrain, pick up new skills, so that is also good for our business."

While Tribe matches tech talent to opportunities, StackUp is a platform for tech talent to pick up relevant skills.



A 2020 file photo of hawker Neo Cheng Leong (left) with his then apprentice Lim Wei Keat at Mr Neo's chicken rice stall in Shunfu. ST FILE PHOTO

As awareness of blockchain has grown in recent years, many companies are interested to explore how such technology can help their business. This drives demand for software engineers with blockchain-based skills, such as knowing various smart contract languages or even how to write code in Golang, a programming language tailored for microservices that is a fast-growing rival to other

established backend languages. StackUp is a training and talent platform that invites software engineers to register to acquire skills, pays small cash rewards when they do so, and then encourages them to apply those skills to build services or solve problems via hackathons. When their skillsets are advanced, they can explore job openings on the platform. Such gamification helps keep the members engaged and



Mr Ng Yi Ming, managing partner of Tribe Accelerator, which advocates the benefits of blockchain technology, in a 2020 file photo. ST FILE PHOTO

active. The platform has about 80,000 members, many in developing markets across Asia, Latin America and Africa. Next growth area: Eastern Europe.

As for the crypto bust, Yi Ming muses that the resulting soul-searching in the community is good for the sector's growth if it leads to better regulation and higher standards. "When the global financial crisis hit, there were changes to capital ratio

requirements. It led to safer financial institutions. Similarly, the fallout in the crypto markets can be a good thing, if it leads to better rules for all."

My worries for Yi Ming were unfounded. He already has plans for the next phase of growth. The company has more than 75 employees, with 60 based in Singapore. The young technopreneur is riding the digital waves, including the crypto crash, with skill.

One young Singaporean in New York, living his dream of creating artisanal food that wins over people, one chicken rice plate at a time. Another in Singapore, with eyes towards Eastern Europe, looking to develop a global community of tech talent in blockchain.

The common thread in both their stories: finding opportunity in adversity. When the pandemic ended one set of plans, Wei Keat became a hawker. When that didn't work out, he ended up in New York, leading a multicultural team to make chicken rice. For Yi Ming, his ability to spot the opportunity in skills training, at a time when Big Tech is retrenching thousands, is an asset.

What does 2023 have in store? No one knows, but I think Wei Keat and Yi Ming – and many other Singaporeans embarking on daring adventures – will be OK.

As I hope, will all of us. Happy New Year.

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