

3rd Gen Hainanese Kueh Makers Open Cute Shop In Bras Basah, Includes 19-Year-Old Ex-Chocolatier

The cousins continue their late grandma's legacy by selling her *yi bua* at their photogenic shop, All Things Hainanese.



Stella Thng  
10 Jan 2023 at 17:35

All Things Hainanese   kueh   Bras Basah Complex   Hainan Cuisine   yi



Say 'kueh' and most of us think of colourful nonya kueh, which can easily be found island-wide from hawker stalls to Bengawan Solo chain stores. Hainanese kueh, on the other hand, is far less common, so it's refreshing to find a [hipster joint](#) selling it among the musty book stores at Bras Basah Complex.

All Things Hainanese, which started as a [home-based business](#), caught our eye immediately with their signboard in a quiet corner of level 2. The cute logo features their signature *yi bua* (glutinous rice kueh with grated coconut, peanuts, sesame seeds and gula Melaka), outlined with neon lights. Step into the pretty white and coconut green-themed shop, and you'll be greeted by an Instagrammable mural of an affable old lady holding a tray of *yi bua*.

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This is the late Madam Yeoh Min Lin, grandma to four young kueh makers – (from left in pic) Josephine Loi, 24, Jocelyn Loi, 30, Charmaine Goh, 19, and Esmond Goh, 24. Jocelyn, Charmaine and Esmond hand-make the kueh and bake their cookies daily in their kitchen which, unfortunately, isn't a show kitchen so we couldn't witness the process.

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**Grandma's sudden demise inspired the collab among cousins**

Mdm Yeoh was the founder of Hainan Cuisine & Snacks hawker stall at Toa Payoh Lorong 7. When she passed away suddenly during an afternoon nap in April 2019, it left a gaping hole in her close-knit family. The spritely 82-year-old matriarch was one of the few in Singapore who make yi bua. She started selling it alongside her traditional kaya bread to raise her five kids after her husband's death in the 1970s. She had never really retired even though she'd largely handed over the ropes to her third daughter, Mdm Goh See Mui, 57, mum to Jocelyn and Josephine. "Grandma was at the stall every day to 'give eye power'," recalls Jocelyn.





一颗椰子，变出百般味。

一颗意把，延续万般情谊。





To pay tribute to grandma and as a form of healing, Jocelyn roped in her sister Josephine and cousin Charmaine to start their home-based business, All Things Hainanese, in September 2020. Every weekend, the three cousins hand-made yi bua, Hainanese kaya and other sweet treats, winning over a new generation of fans on Instagram. They used to help out at granny's stall.

Although Mdm Goh's Toa Payoh hawker stall is open five days a week, manpower shortage and the tight space meant that she could only produce a limited quantity. "Sometimes, customers drove all the way there only to leave empty-handed," says Jocelyn. The girls' HBB on weekends not just expanded their production, their delivery option also saved customers the hassle of queuing up. It also gave the cousins the chance to carry on the family heritage and reach out to a new audience.

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With their HBB's growing customer base asking for weekday orders, the girls decided to take the plunge and expand the biz. On December 3, together with cousin Esmond Goh, 24, they opened a gentrified brick-and-mortar takeaway store at Bras Basah Complex.





**Why Hainanese kueh under-represented in Singapore**

“Yi bua can be considered a rare find in Singapore though it is such an iconic snack of the Hainanese culture. We think that the majority of Hainanese folks here know of this kueh but may not have shared its uniqueness, hence it is under-represented, compared to other kuehs,” explains Jocelyn.

Kueh aside, most people also tend to associate Hainanese cuisine with Hainanese chicken rice or their fusion western food. “These are easily available and not exclusively prepared by the Hainanese. So, they are not just representative dishes of the Hainanese, they are also dishes that represent Singapore [as a whole], hence the difference in popularity,” she adds.





**New shop location chosen for nostalgic reasons**

Facing Seah Street and Raffles Hotel, the location was chosen not just because of its central location, but also because it is near the old Hainanese enclave. "That was where my grandma used to live with her children," says Jocelyn, referencing the Middle Road, Purvis Street and Seah Street which was home to the Hainanese community. (They make up just 7% of the Chinese in Singapore.) The historic streets are immortalised as a mural on the outside wall flanking the shop. This corner shop cost \$60,000 to set up.



**Quitting professional careers to make kueh**



Jocelyn says she had the epiphany to make yi bua when it hit her that her mum (left in pic) is getting on in years. "It's very hard work. How long more can she do this?" Unwilling to let this heritage kueh be lost once her mum retires, she said it took a leap of faith for her to give up a well-paying job managing events at hotels for the last 10 years, to jump into this full time. "But this is much more fulfilling than my usual work," says Jocelyn.



Ex-pastry chef and chocolatier in the house

She is joined by 19-year-old Charmaine (second from right), an At Sunrice-trained pastry chef, who quit her job as a chocolatier at Janice Wong Singapore, where she worked for 18 months. "As much as I love [making kueh], it was bittersweet having to quit making chocolates as it's something I enjoy eating. Ever since I watched *Charlie and The Chocolate Factory* when I was eight, I wanted to win a golden ticket and visit a chocolate factory one day, just like Charlie Bucket. Hence, to be working in a chocolate factory was like a childhood dream come true," says Charmaine.

"But making Hainanese kueh holds a special place in my heart. It constantly reminds me of how fortunate I am and how close-knitted we are as a family to be able to run such an extraordinary business in honour of our late grandmother. We have been watching her make Hainanese kueh since we were crawling on all fours. And as the Hainanese is such a small community in Singapore, it is rewarding having this opportunity to keep a dying tradition alive and pass it on to future generations."

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Although she is now taking a new culinary direction, Charmaine says that her training in making fancy European desserts has not gone to waste. "It was a memorable experience learning from professional chefs and training in a commercial kitchen," says Charmaine. "The transitioning from a HBB to a brick-and-mortar shop was a huge step for my cousins and me, with a lot to learn along the way," she adds. Now that they have a proper kitchen to work in, Charmaine says new products, be it traditional flavours or modernised versions, are on the cards.

Meanwhile, Esmond is currently working on his real estate license and juggles that with business development at the shop. Josephine works full-time as a senior account executive at a Fintech company and helps out at All Things Hainanese on weekends.





**New shop attracting old and new generation of fans**

Other than their HBB customers (mostly middle-aged boomers and a growing crowd of younger Hainanese) checking out the store, there is now patronage from residents and tenants of Bras Basah Complex and nearby buildings. During our review, one customer bought 15 pieces of yi bua, which she is hand-carrying to Malaysia for her Hainanese mother-in-law.





**The menu**



All their regular items from their home-based biz are sold here: yi bua (Hainanese kueh isn't known for its variety — yi bua is the one size fits all quintessential Hainanese kueh, say the ladies), traditional Hainanese-style kaya, yi bua cookies, mochi, and bua art (a reverse yi bua where the coconut filling coats the glutinous rice kueh) though that wasn't available the morning we were there. Prices are the same as at the Toa Payoh stall. You can buy single pieces when you walk in at the two physical shops, but you'd have to buy a minimum of six pieces for delivery, via their website. You can also pick up a bowl of laksa, an Americano, Flat White or TWG tea to go. Currently, they are also selling over a dozen varieties of Chinese New Year goodies.



**Yi Bua, \$1.40 (8 DAYS Pick!)**

This white kueh with a coconut-centric filling is the go-to option for Hainanese events. “Yi” means memories and when the snack is emblazoned with a red dot, is typically eaten on celebrations like weddings, Chinese New Year and babies’ full-month celebrations; a plain white one is used for funerals. “There’s a saying in the Hainanese culture: *wu ye bu cheng gao* (this mandarin version loosely translates as ‘without coconut, you can’t make kueh’), which implies the significance of coconut in Hainanese snacks,” explains Jocelyn.

We love its fragrant filling – it only comes in one flavour – grated coconut, toasted peanuts and sesame seeds, sweetened with gula Melaka and perked up with a zing of freshly squeezed ginger juice which you wouldn’t find in say, nonya kueh. The filling takes at least three hours of prep time, including frying it in a big wok over the stove till toasty and caramelised. It’s then wrapped in glutinous rice flour dough, nestled in a coconut leaf box and steamed daily at 7am. The mouthfeel is like a stuffed, sticky muah chee, with a chewier texture than ang ku kueh and a punchier filling than ondeh ondeh. The filling is grittier than what we are used to in Teochew and nonya kueh, but we like how it offers more bite.



**Laksa, \$4.50 (8 DAYS Pick!)**



Fans of the brand's HBB may be surprised to find this un-Hainanese 'new' item on their menu. Actually, Grandma had been selling laksa at the Toa Payoh stall for the last 20 years. We had our reservations but surprisingly, we enjoyed our bowl. Their standard \$4.50 portion (at Toa Payoh, you can choose a \$3.50 or \$4.50 version) comes with two quail eggs, four prawns, tau pok, bean sprouts and fish cake. We love that they are heavy-handed with the hae bee and coconut milk, resulting in a satisfyingly lemak broth that we slurped up. Chilli aficionados will complain that the homemade sambal belacan is not spicy enough, but we find it pretty tasty.



**Ang Ku Kueh, \$1.20 for peanut or mung bean; Pandan Coconut, \$1.40**

Obviously, ang ku kueh is Teochew and not Hainanese. Still, this is freshly made daily and nice enough. The dough-to-filling ratio is just right and the filling isn't too sweet. The Pandan Coconut one is like the PG-rated coconut filling for those who don't like the ginger in yi bua. Not bad, but we prefer the yi bua.



**Kaya Butter Croissant \$2 each; Traditional Handmade Kaya, \$4 a jar**



The coconutty, slightly grainy kaya scented with caramel Hainanese style is served with a supplier-sourced croissant and a slice of cold butter. It's a crusty, modern alternative for kaya toast and we enjoyed the rustic texture of the house-made kaya.

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**YB Cookies, \$12**

A newfangled invention from the ladies' HBB days, this is basically the yi bua filling mixed with butter cookie dough and baked with a dollop of gula Melaka in the middle. Crunchy, not too sweet and with a less obvious tinge of ginger, its unusual east-west flavour is rather sophisticated. Makes a good Chinese New Year gift, or just something to nibble on when you're feeling peckish.





It's nice that these young entrepreneurs are introducing the relatively obscure Hainanese kueh yi bua to a new generation of customers at their adorable shop. Their signature coconut-filled offering is definitely the star here and can hold its own against any good Teochew and nonya kueh. Another unlikely star at All Things Hainanese: the flavoursome laksa. Too bad there's no space to sit and enjoy your treats here. But Jocelyn assures: "We're looking to have a bigger space in the near future, which allows dine-in and we can serve our kuehs with Hainanese coffee". Lovely.



The details

*All Things Hainanese is at #02-19 Blk Bras Basah Complex, 231 Bain St, S180231. Open daily except Mon. Tue to Fri 10am to 3pm (or till sold out). Sat & Sun 10am to 5pm (or till sold out).*

*More info via [website](#), [Facebook](#) & [Instagram](#)*

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