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# PASSION, CROWDFUNDING AND A SICHUAN PEPPER GIN

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*A husband-and-wife team turns passion into a craft distillery business*

In May 2016, Singapore-registered craft spirit company **Paper Lantern Distilling** raised S\$36,680 (approx. US\$27,150) in a campaign to launch and sell its Sichuan Pepper gin on crowdfunding platform Pozible. Its unique product – it also includes ginger, galangal and lemongrass – and unusual way of building brand awareness helped it gain media attention and cultivate a budding fan base.

For the company's founders, husband-and-wife team **Rick Ames** and **Simin Kayhan Ames**, it is the realisation of their passion for alcohol and culmination of years of research and experimentation. The American expatriates have been living in Singapore since 2012, and incorporated the company the following year. Kayhan Ames then left her finance industry job to run Paper Lantern full-time while hubby kept his day job while helping out after hours.

"We tried a lot of different combinations of working arrangements: both working, one working, then the other working," the couple tell *Perspectives@SMU* in an email interview from Kayhan Ames' native Turkey. "We are both passionate people, so when we both had full time jobs, it was really hard to focus on running a business as well, so we knew that one of us would need to focus exclusively on Paper Lantern if we really wanted to make a real go at this.

"The best advice we can offer [to budding entrepreneurs]...is: give yourself a window of time to try it, and then re-evaluate every six months. For us, regardless of success, it is the journey that is the fun part. We are building something new, and there is real pride we take in doing that."

The Ames' new adventure has been equally fun for the Ames' three young children aged six, three, and one, although it has not been all smooth sailing.

"They love it and they hate it," they recall. "Admittedly, when we were launching, we let it take a bit too much time away from the kids, but we have established a better balance now and are constantly checking in with each other to make sure we are getting it right.

“You always can see the world of a child through how they play. Clearly this has had an effect on them, because when they are playing in the bath, their favorite game is ‘making gin’.”

## DISTILLING SUCCESS

Meanwhile, the challenges associated with running a small distillery are seldom too far off the Ames’ minds. Of the 1,000 litres they’ve produced for the first batch of gin, over a third has been sold in 700 ml bottles through the Pozible campaign. Time to rake in the profits, right? Not so.

“A big challenge with producing a consumer product is cash flow,” they explain. “Everyone wants to get paid up front, which means you have to put your money in up front, way before you even have something to sell.

“The crowdfunding campaign was really a way we could move the cash flow forward to help us out with some of the final costs to bring our product to market. Now that sales have started, that cash flow can help us continue to sell, but the crowdfunding support was absolutely critical for our successful launch.”

The Pozible campaign, which generated revenues more than double the original S\$15,000 target, was an idea that the Ames came up with while engaging the Singapore arm of London-based agency W Communications.

“One of the launch decisions we made was to not use a delivery company and instead, as much as we can, deliver the bottles to consumers ourselves,” say the couple, who also hand labeled the initial batch of gin. “When we get to meet our supporters and thank them for believing in us, we also get to talk about how they came to hear about us. It is pretty great to learn about where are the touchpoints with your customers, and so often we can directly trace that back to W. They have been amazing.”

When asked about future plans, the Ames say they plan to set up a distillery in Singapore – the first batch of gin was made at the Edelbrand distillery in Chiang Mai. As they wrote on the Pozible campaign page:

*“One of the things we love most about living in Southeast Asia is the abundance and variety of fruits, vegetables, and spices. But then we looked around at the shelves in the liquor stores and behind the bars, we didn’t see those local flavours showing up in the bottles...When there is so much beauty in the local flavours here, why aren’t there more spirits that showcase it?”*

That raises an inevitable question: How about a durian-flavoured gin?

“We have actually looked into this in the past – maybe a durian brandy or a liqueur,” they answer. “We have spoken to beer brewers about their experiences with making durian beers, and the one thing they have all said was if you try to do it, be sure you like the flavour of durian, because it is ‘aromatically persistent’ to say the least.”