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10-2019

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Citation

LEOW, Min Ling. Repackaging convenience. (2019). *Excellence Explored*. 29-32.

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Repackaging *Convenience*

Leow Min Ling of Anthony The Spice Maker reflects on updating her family business to preserve Singapore's traditional flavours.



Back in the day of the maritime silk roads, spices were considered luxury goods, valued in the same way we would gold and precious stones. While there remains a strict grading system in the spice world — alongside spices that have retained top dollar — most spices today have become available to the masses, used in everyday dishes and, thanks to a rising consciousness in wellness, alternative health beverages.

Anthony The Spice Maker is widely considered Singapore's pioneer specialty spice blend store. The humble outfit began as a stall in a Chinatown wet market in 2008. As demand for their spice blends grew, so did the family business — they recently opened their first standalone shop along Kreta Ayer Road.

Run by founder, Anthony Leow, and his daughter, Leow Min Ling, the business has evolved to cater to the diverse tastes of their local and international customers. Says Min Ling, "Families have their own heirloom recipes. When my dad used to help out in his family's business, he learned how different aunts and grandmas would make their curries, and from there he developed our signature blends. My father is not greedy — he only wants people to know about his curry powder. But I want to help bring Singapore cuisine to the world — I want people to know we specialise in blends for them to enjoy the traditional flavours of Singapore."



Min Ling, how did Anthony The Spice Maker come about?

My grandparents used to wash shark's fin as a livelihood in the kampong. When they had to move to an HDB flat, they couldn't wash shark's fin because of the smell. Then they heard that a wet market had vacancy for selling spices. Market stalls are allocated — a certain number for dried goods, vegetables, and spices. So my grandfather sent my grandmother and one of my uncles to Tekka Market to learn about spices from the Indians, and they came back to teach the rest of the family how to create spice blends for cooking.

My dad grew up helping out in his family's business and learned how the different races made their curry blends. He worked as a design draftsman, but as he got older, he wanted to do something he was familiar with, so he started Liao Jia Xiang (LJX), which

supplied wholesale spice blends to vendors and supermarkets. Because of the rising rental costs in supermarkets, he decided to close LJX and start small with Anthony the Spice Maker, which started as a wet market stall in 2008.

And you helped to bring the business online. Can you tell us more about that?

When I graduated, I redesigned our webstore to add more features — cooking videos and recipes for the ready-made pastes that we sell. I came up with the idea of putting everything online because I didn't just want to create an online store; I wanted to create a convenient site for our customers to find everything they need in one place. The e-store also caters to the local market because of our busy lifestyles. Our local customers find it convenient that they don't have to come down to place repeat orders.



You've mentioned 'convenience' twice now. Is offering convenience a big part of your customer experience?

Yeah, convenience is one of our main selling points. We make our product convenient for people who make excuses to not cook because all they need to do is order online from home and turn our spice blends into pastes with instructions on our website or packaging.

More importantly, though, it's about the value of our product that we provide — our quality and traditional taste that is hard to get anywhere else. If you talk about convenience alone, you might as well use the instant blends at supermarkets — you just tear them open, add water, add chicken, and you have chicken curry. But people come back to us because they want to take ownership of the food they cook using our spice blends, which contain unadulterated spices without MSG and preservatives. Quality is that added value we provide.

What about your service?

When we started this store, I told my dad that my goal for every customer who walks in is for them to

walk away with new knowledge about spices and Singapore's food. So our customer service is about taking our time with them. I don't like service that's only about transactions — where the customers come, buy, and go. I like to ask questions: do they like to cook? What do they usually cook?

When I find out about their habits or behaviour, I then know what to recommend. Some people just don't eat local food, so I know not to recommend our Singapore blends. Some people are more into eating or drinking healthy, so I talk to them about the benefits of raw spices.

I think business is not so much about making sales but building relationships with our customers. I want our customers to feel comfortable and not stress over having to buy something when they visit. I learned from my dad to be frank with our customers, for example, if he finds out someone doesn't cook, he will tell them not to waste their money on spices. Or if the customer doesn't have a blender at home, he will tell them to buy the ready-made pastes instead. And if they do have a blender, he will tell them to buy the cheaper dried premixes.





What else have you done to deepen your relationship with your customers?

We always try to help them solve their problems. Different people have different cooking skills, so sometimes they come back to the store and say, “why is this bitter?” That’s when my dad will investigate by asking how much oil they used, how long they fried the spices for etc. Our customers used to tell us, “eh you should take a video”, so we kept that in mind.

We now have labels on our products that teach them how to turn dried spices into a paste first. We also have supplementary materials like detailed cooking videos online — all they need to do is scan a QR code that brings them to the relevant page. In our videos we walk them through details like what kind of onion and oil they should use, how to caramelize the onion in the rempah, how big the fire should be.

We recently changed our packaging because we noticed that while kraft packaging may be aesthetically pleasing, it’s easily stained with water or grease when used and would look “dirty” in the fridge. Since we highly recommend customers store spices in the original pouches, we thought we should improve the packaging. We now use waterproof, aluminium spice pouches so it’s easy to clean off oil stains.

We believe in constant improvement because there’s never a perfect way of running a business or marketing it. My dad always says, if you can give 100% to other people’s businesses when you work for them, why not give 200% to your own? 🙌

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