



TOPSTORIES

Handmade in S'pore, with care and some risk

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UNTIL October last year, civil servant Joey Gan had a comfortable career that came with an iron rice bowl.

But the 31-year-old gave it all up to become an entrepreneur – making jam.

The former National Parks Board conservation officer set up an artisanal jam-making venture called GSH Conserves, motivated by the desire to strike it out on his own.

“There’s a resurgence for locally made products now, as more Singaporeans take pride in things that we make ourselves,” said Mr Gan, who chose jams because it is a “pretty untouched niche area” in the Singapore food-product scene.

There are at least 30 independent craft businesses in Singapore, offering everything from handmade leather belts to letterpressed stationery, according to non-profit group Makers of Singapore.

Many of their owners, like Mr Gan, are young and ambitious, eschewing comfortable jobs to start businesses that offer one-of-a-kind products. But they are finding that sustaining such enterprises is an uphill task.

Like many other small businesses, high rentals are a major obstacle to getting their companies off the ground. Still, some, such as 3-D printing label Tinkr, make do by operating from home and going mobile at flea markets.

But the biggest roadblock, they say, is the lack of large-scale appreciation for artisanal goods in Singapore, compared with that in similarly affluent places, like New York and London, where locally handmade goods are embraced and even championed by many.

Mr Aditya Challa, 32, co-founder of microbrewery Jungle Beer, said that bar owners and consumers were reluctant to purchase craft beers from the company when it began brewing them in 2011.

It was only when its brews racked up a few awards that more people started to notice the brand. Sales figures have jumped six-fold, but customers are still resistant to paying a premium for the products, compared to foreign craft beer, said Mr Challa, who runs the company and brews the beers with six others.

Such businesses, which depend on a small niche market of consumers, also face uncertain long-term prospects.

Business lecturer Tan Soo Juuan of the National University of Singapore said their sustainability will depend on whether they can “continue to get the support of their targeted group of customers, especially during economic downturns when most people trim their disposable expenses”.

Still, local craftsmen are optimistic about the growing craft economy in Singapore. More platforms for such businesses have come up in recent years. They include marketplaces like Public Garden, Haystakt and Temporium.

To give them a helping hand, several university students set up Makers of Singapore, a group aimed at promoting craftsmen. It held a dialogue session last month, and will hold an exhibition-cum-marketplace event at Orchard Central on Feb 22 and 23.

Retail expert **Lynda Wee** of Nanyang Technological University noted that, while the market for such artisanal goods is small in Singapore, it is one that is slowly growing, as shoppers “want products that express their individuality, and pieces or shopping experiences that can become talking points”.

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THAT’S MY JAM: Mr Gan, 31, left his job as a National Parks Board officer to set up an artisanal jam-making venture called GSH Conserves.

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