



PHOTO: YEN MENG JIN

# PLAY WITH YOUR FOOD

AS TOLD TO JACQUELYN CHEOK

*Experiencing authentic local cuisine during a vacation is now a must for over 80 per cent of travellers to South-east Asia, according to a latest poll by TripAdvisor. This is evident in Singapore, with four local food-related attractions ranked among TripAdvisor's top 10 activities here. In top spot is Food Playground – a culinary school with a twist – founded by Daniel Tan and Lena Tan (the two are unrelated, though Lena is the wife of Daniel's primary school classmate).*

### WHY FOOD PLAYGROUND?

**Daniel:** Lena and I have always been inspired by stay-at-home-mums and active seniors who are passionate about cooking and sharing their local heritage recipes with like-minded people, but have no avenues to do so because of their lack of professional culinary training or credentials in the food and beverage sector.

This is why at Food Playground, you will not find celebrity chefs or professional cooks. All our culinary instructors and facilitators are local stay-at-home-mums who cook regularly for their families and friends. The only difference is they have an additional avenue to share their culinary passion – with tourists and corporate executives.

**Lena:** While trained chefs tend to focus on cooking techniques, stay-at-home mums are more passionate about local food and sharing recipes and cooking methods. They tend not to hide anything. But a lot of people don't realise that they're an untapped pool of talent with a lot to offer . . . They are like rough diamonds, and we need to polish them.

At Food Playground, I train these mums in everything from cooking and crafting recipes to public speaking and organising programmes. These mums never thought that they could one day conduct their own classes. We want to help them feel good about themselves.

Training takes anything from three to six months.

We also make sure that we give feedback regularly, to help them grow and become better as trainers and individuals. It's important to ensure that interested people grow with the company.

Also, with mums as trainers, people who sign up for our classes feel less intimidated and are more confident in replicating dishes.

**Daniel:** Lena is an avid home cook with experience in several types of cuisine. Interestingly, both of us were former corporate marketers from the travel and pharmaceutical industries. The lack of professional culinary training actually gives us an advantage in hiring and training our instructors and facilitators.

When hiring, we choose candidates who love cooking and interacting. When training, we focus on equipping them with soft skills such as public speaking, storytelling and customer engagement. These are skills that are sorely lacking in many other culinary schools in Singapore.

### SOCIAL ENTERPRISE

**Daniel:** Food Playground is very much a social enterprise. Our core mission is to create dignified and meaningful flexi-work employment opportunities for stay-at-home-mums. We help them monetise their culinary passion and local knowledge through cooking classes for tourists and corporate executives.

It's important for a business to have a conscience

### CARE AND SHARE

*Lena (left) and Daniel (right) are inspired by stay-at-home-mums and active seniors who are passionate about cooking and sharing their local heritage recipes*

because in this globalised world, stakeholders increasingly expect businesses to take a more sustainable and ethical approach to driving profits.

**Lena:** For now, we only hire mums, and we find them at Mums@Work career fairs and through advertisements. For many of them, it's their first job after 12 years. And public speaking, for instance, is something that they are not used to. Some feel shy about telling their own home stories, for fear that tourists may not be interested or be able to relate to them.

We want to instill confidence in these mums and give them the much-needed boost to step out and back into the workforce. I believe we are the only cooking school that does not hire trained chefs.

**Daniel:** In fact, Food Playground is an incredible story of underdogs. When we initially pitched the concept to Spring Singapore for a startup grant in 2012, we kept getting told that tourists and corporate executives will not pay to learn from home cooks. Spring insisted that we will not be able to compete with other cooking schools without recognised chefs in our team.

Two years on, Spring has been surprised to learn that Food Playground has garnered a lot of interest from tourists and even locals. Our underdog team of stay-at-home-mums has overcome overwhelming odds to prove that they are good enough to defeat the giants of the industry.

### LOCALS AND FOREIGNERS

**Daniel:** We have two main groups of customers: tourists and local corporate executives. But lately, more locals – who are starting to appreciate local heritage food – are signing up for our classes too.

Many tourists found out about us via TripAdvisor. Having received a lot of positive reviews and being consistently ranked Number 1 for activities in Singapore make us a “must-do” for many visitors to Singapore.

We were the 2013 recipient of the Best Enrichment Experience award from the Singapore Tourism Board (STB), which gave us lots of visibility and credibility in the travel and tourism industry.

**Lena:** Tourists typically expect less but are always wowed by the immersive nature of our hands-on cultural cooking class. Most tourists attend our classes thinking that they will learn how to cook local food but they walk away knowing so much more about Singapore's food heritage and culture.

This is why cultural cooking classes for tourists are typically conducted in smaller groups, where participants can cook in pairs – sometimes with strangers – so that they can better learn how to cook the recipes and replicate them at home.

**Daniel:** For corporate team-building, cooking is done in bigger groups and usually in a competitive format to achieve specific objectives. Expectations of corporate clients often revolve around building teamwork and cohesiveness, bonding opportunities and working towards a common goal of preparing and enjoying a gourmet meal together. Hence for corporate clients, we offer more varied menus such as Thai, Japanese and pizza menus.

**Lena:** People who complain that our classes are expensive don't see the value-add. It's more than just learning how to cook. It's spending time to cook with your colleagues and like-minded people. Everyone will be engaged and have a meaningful time. ■