

# When the customer is king

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## When the customer is king

Amid the flurry of restaurant closures, several home-grown brands that pay attention to what diners want are expanding



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The customer is king might sound pretty basic, but with the food and beverage scene suffering, businesses ignore this at their own peril.

The industry has taken a beating over the last two to three years, as Singaporeans travel abroad with their strong Singapore dollars to eat, drink and party. Many are also cutting back on spending at a time of global security and economic uncertainty.

There seems to be no end in sight. The flurry of restaurant closures in December 2025 has continued into 2026. Restaurants that have shuttered include casual restaurant Chef's Tavern, Spanish restaurants Sabio and Sugarra, contemporary Asian restaurant Asu, casual brunch spot Open Farm Community, Tiong Bahru Bakery Safari in Dempsey, Korean restaurant Onmi, Ruth's Chris

Steak House and Hooters in Clarke Quay.

Soon to close are The Halia at the Singapore Botanic Gardens after 25 years, and nasi padang institution Warong Nasi Pariaman in North Bridge Road after 78 years.

There are new challenges ahead. By end-2026 or the start of 2027, the Rapid Transit System that takes people from Singapore to Johor Bahru in five minutes is

expected to be up and running. Cue floods of day trippers into Malaysia.

Meanwhile, new restaurants keep opening. Statistics from the Accounting and Corporate Regulatory Authority for 2025 show that 4,100 food businesses started up in 2025 – the number is usually under 4,000. Closures totalled 3,148 in 2025, more than the 3,047 in 2024.

Yet, at this grim time, several Singapore brands are expanding – hawker food restaurant chain Hawkers' Street, bubble tea chain PlayMade, as well as sourdough bread and soup chains Anna's and The Soup Spoon. Their owners say that paying attention to the customer is key to surviving 2026 and beyond.

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### HAWKERS' STREET: FAMOUS STALLS UNDER ONE ROOF

Info: hawkersstreet.com.sg

The first Hawkers' Street opened at Ion Orchard in 2021. Then came two more in 2024 at Tampines 1 and Bukit Panjang Plaza. In 2025, the chain was on a roll, opening at Eastpoint Mall, Tang Plaza, Square 2 and The Clementi Mall. That last one is the largest, with 418 seats and 16 stalls.

In 2026, at least three more will open – at 100AM mall at the end of April, and at Kallang Wave Mall and Anchorpoint later in 2026.

Turns out, making it convenient for diners to eat from famous hawker stalls, some with the Michelin Guide's Bib Gourmand recognition, is a very good idea.

Mr Jack Tan, 56, who started the chain and is co-founder of the Select Group, says: "We love our hawker food, and we bring popular and award-winning selections together under one roof, so diners can enjoy them in air-conditioned comfort, without having to travel all over the island."

The first Hawkers' Street at Ion was a way to retain the staff he had working at three foodcourts the group ran at Changi Airport. They shuttered when Covid-19 hit.

The Ion outlet, with 92 seats and six stalls – including King Of Fried Rice, Beach Road Scissors Cut Curry Rice and Chef Wei HK Cheong Fun – was a hit.

By 2023, borders were opening up and people were going back to the office and travelling.

Mr Tan says: "People started going back to malls and their eating habits changed. I started to knock on developers' doors for opportunities to open Hawkers' Street on a bigger scale."

The avowed hawker food fan, who eats at hawker stalls at least three times a week, persuaded more hawker brands to work with him. Some feathers in his cap include Bib Gourmand brands Tai Wah Pork Noodle, Tiong Bahru



Customers can dine in a nostalgic setting at Hawkers' Street, which was started by Mr Jack Tan (right). The chain has an outlet at Tampines 1 (above). ST PHOTO: JASEL POH

Hainanese Boneless Chicken Rice and Tai Seng Fish Soup. Well-known ones include Koung's Wan Tan Mee, Chinatown Tan's Tutu Coconut Cake and Jlak Song Mee Hoon Kway.

Mr Tan is looking to have at least three to four brands for every

hawker food genre, so that customers do not see the same stalls at every one of his outlets.

Diners can check the stall signs to find out if a stall is on the Bib Gourmand list or where the original outlet is located.

Hawkers' Street may look like a

chain of foodcourts, but it is not. Instead of renting stalls out to hawkers, he signs them on as partners.

"For most hawkers, the biggest concerns around expansion are funding, manpower and supply chain management," he says. "The

Select Group partners like-minded hawker brands to help ease these pressures, allowing brand owners to focus on training the head chef and maintaining food quality."

Brand owners do quality checks on the food and meet Select once a month to discuss operations, launch new menu items or nip any potential problems in the bud. Both parties share the profits equally, he adds. "The food should be at least 80 per cent similar to the original. We always strive to achieve close to the real deal."

The group also runs the Peach Garden Chinese restaurant chain, fast-food chain Texas Chicken and beef bowl chain Waa Cow!, among other brands. It also has a catering arm.

He does not have to cram in the stalls because he is not collecting rent. Prices typically cost 50 cents to \$1 more than at hawker or coffee-shop stalls. A bowl of noodles ranges in price from \$5.90 to \$6.50. For every stall, he makes sure there are about 25 seats available for diners.

They, in turn, get their pick of hawker gems and dine in settings he describes as "modern nostalgia".

There are some gems he has not been able to persuade on board, however. He says some hawkers selling braised soya sauce chicken, kway chap and fish noodles have turned him down. Still, on weekdays, his seven Hawkers' Street outlets serve 30,000 to 40,000 people in total, and 40,000 to 50,000 on weekends. Numbers like these give him the confidence to open three to five outlets a year.

"Hawker food is a no-brainer for Singaporeans," he says.



### PLAYMADE: TAKING BUBBLE TEA TO UZBEKISTAN

Info: playmade.com

Bubble tea brand PlayMade has 28 stores in Singapore, three in Malaysia and one in South Korea that opened in January. And it is looking even farther afield.

The first PlayMade in Uzbekistan is set to open in October with a franchisee. Founders Amanda Poo, 37, her husband Tan Guo Rong, 37, and Crystal Wee, 40, see it as a stepping stone to take bubble tea to all of Central Asia.

In South Korea, the first PlayMade opened in Gangnam. The store is in Daechi-dong, where hagwon or tuition academies proliferate. They see the potential for many more stores.

In Uzbekistan alone, they envisage 30 stores. Mr Tan says Central Asia is an untapped market with a "huge, growing middle class, and people craving international brands".

The trio are also eyeing the US, another big market. Bubble tea has made inroads there, with Taiwanese and Chinese brands such as Gong Cha, Chagee and Hey Tea establishing themselves there. Customers are not limited to Asians either, they say. They are looking for partners who can run potentially hundreds of franchised stores.

PlayMade's story begins in Taiwan, where Ms Poo and Ms Wee, both fans of bubble tea, fell in love with the drinks – and soft, chewy boba – from OneZo in 2017. They brought it in under the PlayMade brand in 2017, and now own the trademark for it, allowing them to take it overseas.

They pride themselves on making the boba in-house, hand-pulping fruit for the drinks and brewing tea they source from Taiwan. Along the way, the brand



PlayMade (above) was founded by (from far left) Ms Crystal Wee, Mr Tan Guo Rong and Ms Amanda Poo. PHOTOS: NG SOR LUAN, PLAYMADE

has grown to offer more than just bubble tea. At its four Playground by PlayMade cafes – at AMK Hub, Punggol Coast Mall, Suntec City and The Seletar Mall – customers can also order gelato (from \$4.80 a scoop), egglet waffles (from \$3.40) and Taiwanese Egg Pancake Roll (from \$4.70).

It is the brand's way of working itself into the lifestyle of its customers. Ms Poo was an auditor before becoming a bubble tea entrepreneur and she looks after the brand's finances and operations. She says the brand began serving its drinks at weddings, children's birthdays and corporate events starting in 2018.

To make a point that bubble tea can also be healthy, PlayMade has collaborated with gyms since 2024 to concoct healthy drinks.

She says: "We don't think that drinking bubble tea means that they're standing in the way of you and your fitness goals."

"We spent 2024 and 2025 looking at how to penetrate the community better. If you know your customer like the back of your hand, then you can come up with flavours that appeal to them."

Mr Tan, who oversees business development, says the team looks closely at feedback from customers. One of the three founders would respond to e-mails from customers.

He even recruited a customer, who had given feedback that her drink tasted sweeter than expected, to be part of the brand's "mys-

tery shopper" programme. That customer now evaluates the drinks and service standards, and gives feedback.

Ms Wee, who oversees product development, human resources and leasing, takes the feedback on Instagram seriously, and has built a community of customers who give their opinions regularly.

She says: "For customers, toppings and tea are still key. So, we are bringing in Five Scented Jasmine Green Tea leaves from Taiwan, which has layered flavours and some smokiness. The tea will be made into boba too."

All this groundwork has put the brand in a position to go overseas. The decision to go with the franchise model comes from a lesson from the Malaysia market. PlayMade runs three stores there, although Ms Poo admits they have not "cracked the code" for the market.

She says: "It's a huge market and, like California, you have to drive everywhere. So, when we launch marketing campaigns, people need a lot of time to react. The traffic jams there can get quite bad, so there's inertia to go to the store. Here, you just go to the nearest mall, it's so much easier."

Hence, the brand prefers to work with partners overseas who understand those markets and how consumers behave.

While the team is bullish about taking its brand overseas, it is exercising caution on home ground. Instead, it is looking to increase the yield of its existing stores here in this small market. "We will be careful not to over-expand in Singapore," Ms Poo says.

### ANNA'S/THE SOUP SPOON: GROWING WITH CUSTOMERS

Info: betterforme.shop and thesoupspoon.com

When Ms Anna Lim and her husband Andrew Chan – who started The Soup Spoon, a chain with 27 stores – found out that customers were buying their soup, packed in styrofoam cups, to freeze so that they could have them handy, she started selling soup in pouches in 2006.

During Covid-19, when people were ordering soup for delivery, she started heat sealing the containers like cups of bubble tea, to ensure they would not spill.

In 2020, she launched Souper-holic, a programme that allows members to chalk up points when they order in-store or online to use to pay for future purchases, get discounts and use the app to order ahead for takeaway or dine-in.

The 50-year-old says: "The data tells us who our customers are, where they live and whether they dine in-store or order via delivery."

"Over the years, we've come to understand our customers' pain points. It's all about these little tweaks we've done along the way to address them."

That experience also informs her new brand, Anna's, which came about when she started baking sourdough bread during the pandemic. Ms Lim, who used to work in healthcare, started appreciating the benefits of sourdough bread on gut health.

In 2022, the first Anna's opened in Punggol Drive. The cafe serves breakfast, sandwiches, salads, soup, coffee and smoothies.

A second, called Anna's X Union by The Soup Spoon, which serves sourdough bakes and soups, opened in 2024 at the National University of Singapore, where the



(Above) Anna's X Union by The Soup Spoon's Grilled Chicken Breast. The cafe also serves bakes, including Sticky Date Sourdough Cake and Anna's Sourdough Oatmeal Raisin Cookies. (Left) The Soup Spoon's founders Andrew Chan and Anna Lim. ST PHOTOS: JASEL POH

Central Library is. A third opened in November 2025 at Punggol Coast Mall, where the Punggol Digital District and the Singapore Institute of Technology are located.

Mr Chan, 51, is looking to open another Anna's in 2026, closer to town. The Soup Spoon is likely to open two to three more stores. He adds that HDB malls might be possible locations for the new outlets.

He says: "We are still expanding, but cautiously. The market is still in relative uncertainty and overseas brands may distort the market."

But understanding customers has also led to new projects for the couple. Ms Lim, a former marathoner who now takes part in Hyrox competitions, figured there must be others like her.

She says: "So when I went on this fitness kick, I thought, this is a pain point for me. How am I going to meal prep, figure out the macros and the protein? Actually, we have the protein in the stores. The next step is to pack it and make it available in the stores."

"We did different flavours and I was the guinea pig. I was eating very hard chicken fillets for many months. There was a lot of tweaking."

They plan to launch the chilled chicken fillets, packed two to a bag for a 100g single serving, in the second quarter of 2026. There are five flavours for a start: salt, pepper and lime; laksa pesto; tandoori; herb chicken; and Thai lemongrass.

