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## From pop-up to permanent: The new route to F&B success?



*SINGAPORE — Last year, Michelle Looi and Sarah Tan went to Paris to train at Le Cordon Bleu for a year, where they developed a taste for creatively made eclairs with different fillings. When the former accountant and civil servant returned to Singapore, they decided to open a store specialising in them.*

**BY SERENE LIM - JULY 29**

When Michelle Looi and Sarah Tan went to Paris to train at Le Cordon Bleu for a year in 2013, they developed a taste for creatively made eclairs with different fillings. Upon their return to Singapore last year, the former accountant and civil servant wanted to open a store specialising in them.

“Eclairs were very popular in Paris when we were studying there in 2013. There was an eclair store called L’Eclair de Genie, where we would eat four eclairs of different flavours every time we were there,” said Tan. “The trend was starting to catch on in Asia. We

wanted to be the first — and top — éclair specialty store here.”

However, they were unsure about how consumers here would take to the idea. So, they started taking online orders and appearing at various pop-up events last November. In just eight months, the 26-year-old duo opened L'éclair Patisserie, Singapore's first éclair boutique, at Singapore Shopping Centre.

A fellow pop-up regular is Bjorn Shen. Since the outgoing restaurateur-chef started Artichoke in 2010, he chalked up plenty of pop-up experience at various farmers' markets, music gigs and food festivals, such as Creatory in 2013, where his chicken-centric Thai food concept Bird Bird first appeared. Two weeks ago, Shen announced that Bird Bird is finally landing with a brick-and-mortar outlet at Ann Siang Hill, which will be ready in November,

“Even though I've been in the business for a while, I didn't want to start another restaurant just like that,” said Shen of his decision to go pop-up. “You can never be too sure. There's a lot of risk in opening a new place — we learnt some hard lessons with Artichoke, which took two years to find its footing.”

## **GO FOR A TEST RUN**

This pop-up-to-store route has not only found traction with Shen, Tan and Looi: Pop-up sensation Park Bench Deli welcomed eager, hungry hordes to its outlet at Telok Ayer earlier this month. Halal eatery The Lab first began in a central kitchen doing pop-up events before settling down to a space at Jalan Pisang last November. South East Sliders by chef Damian De Silva, which was last seen in ION Orchard a week ago, will also be putting down roots at the new PasarBella at Suntec City when it opens in September.

As Shen pointed out, doing pop-ups is definitely a good way to test the market. Tan and Looi admitted they would not have plunged so quickly into the opening of the store had the response from their pop-ups been less than enthusiastic, especially given the high costs of rental and manpower. Pop-ups also give new food concepts and brands the chance to gain a following.

“Brands need time to build an identity, and we get that chance with every pop-up that we do. We can see how people respond, fine-tune our offerings, and figure out what we're about. It helps to do all of this without a restaurant, where everyone will be watching your move. It's like playing in the kiddie pool before swimming in the ocean,” mused Shen.

And in this age of social media saturation, every hashtag and shout-out counts. Pop-ups, with their one-off appeal and ability to draw the crowd add to that frenzy. Yes, hype does matter.

## **POP UP TO SCALE UP**

Yet for all the allure of pop-ups, the trio agreed it would be unsustainable to simply continue that way. For one, they're making a living in the F&B industry — there are not enough pop-up events to go around, and not all pop-up events are made equal (and we're not even talking about pop-up fatigue). Shen revealed he even lost a significant amount of money at the Singapore International Jazz Festival in March, where vendors had to commit to prepping 1,000 portions, most of which ended up unsold due to poor event management.

Tan and Looi also said that they would have eventually opened a cafe, albeit a more generic one with different kinds of pastries and food, instead of a specialised éclair store.

“But our pop-up experience provided a glimpse into having a real store, especially how to take orders and deal with customers,” shared Tan. “Of course with a real store, there are a lot more factors at play. For example, we had to learn to estimate quantities to produce and sell daily in a real shop compared to dealing with a fixed quantity for pop-ups.”

Shen had a more pragmatic approach. “I don't think the pop-up experience helps operationally at all. It's not about scaling up because the rules are different. There is no guarantee that being popular at pop-ups means you'll be able to translate that to a successful restaurant.”

Tan and Looi said that newbies wanting to give the F&B scene a shot ought to find good partners and mentors to provide invaluable guidance and support. “We were lucky to have known the two friendly owners of Wimply Lu Chocolate Cafe, who have been in the business for several years,” said Tan, who also worked part-time there to gain experience.

“They provided us with the opportunity to hold our first pop-up for three weekends last November at their new cafe, Three Years In A Balloon (3YB). Following that, they gave us lots of advice in terms of how to deal with staff and hiring issues, and shared their contacts for good suppliers.”

Given the popularity of pop-ups, Shen doesn't expect the trend to go away soon, as more F&B outlets will also leverage on the outreach and buzz pop-ups create to come up with new ideas and dishes.

“Some of the best food I've tried had been at pop-ups. Pop-up events aren't just cool, they're beneficial. They're work like incubators where you can be more experimental and creative with your food,” he said. “I think we're just starting to see what can be done with pop-ups.”

Looi and Tan are also taking such lessons to heart. They're experimenting and coming up with new offerings such as the locally inspired pandan kaya éclairs launched last week, which were warmly received by customers. Even with their brick-and-mortar more or less in place, they are also not ruling out collaborations with other chefs and — yes,

you guessed it — appearing at pop-up events.

CORRECTION: An earlier version of this article reported that Michelle Looi and Sarah Tan went to Paris last year to train at the Le Cordon Bleu. This is incorrect. They went in 2013. The earlier story also said chef Bjorn Shen's latest creation is Bird Bird. This is incorrect. His latest creation is Neh Neh Pop. We apologise for the errors.

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