



# THE TEST

While hypermodern Singapore looks to the future on its 52nd birthday this month, a handful of second- and third-generation business owners are determined to keep the city's traditional trades alive

By Delle Chan  
Photography By Rebecca Toh

# OF TIME













## ONE PIECE AT A TIME

Entering Cheong Ann Watch Maker is like stepping back in time. Just about every inch of the shophouse is crammed with vintage timepieces: from octagonal schoolhouse clocks adorning the walls to imperious grandfather clocks taller than the average person.

In the afternoon heat, the air in the shop is thick and still, save for the gentle whirring of a fan and the occasional languid chime of a clock. Here, David Lim sits at a desk and pores over a dismantled timepiece, his face a study in concentration. Pushing his spectacles back into his hair, the 56-year-old pauses his tinkering to tell me about Cheong Ann.

Despite its name, the shop trades and repairs antique clocks – and David reckons it is the only specialised shop in Singapore to do so. They used to service watches too, but after taking over the business from his father in 2000, David decided to focus on clocks. “Unlike watches, which only became popular at the turn of the century, the history of clocks goes back hundreds of years,” he explains.

Partway through our conversation, his son enters the shop. With his wire-rimmed spectacles and slick hair, 24-year-old Shawn looks like any other millennial. But just like his father and grandfather before him, he’s an expert at repairing timepieces.

**ABOVE:**  
SOME OF THE TOOLS  
OF THE TRADE

**OPPOSITE PAGE:**  
FATHER-SON TEAM  
DAVID AND SHAWN  
ARE EXPERTS AT  
REPAIRING  
TIMEPIECES

Having honed his skills at the shop since he was a teenager, Shawn is poised to take over the business when David retires. “I’ve never thought of doing anything else, really,” he muses. “I love all things vintage, so I’m lucky to have been born into this trade.”

However, it isn’t always easy to run a business together. “Sometimes, it can be stressful to work under Dad’s eye,” Shawn confesses with a laugh. Indeed, David’s standards are high. “Shawn still has a long way to go before I can retire,” he says candidly.

Nevertheless, David is glad that his youngest son has come on board. “Without Shawn, I would probably close Cheong Ann and call it a day. After all, I’m just a custodian of these clocks, taking care of them for the next generation. I’ll be happy to hand that responsibility to him when he’s ready.”



The repair of antique clocks requires precision and care. It can take up to two years to fix a single clock, and the duo goes to great lengths to source authentic parts. “We try to repair the clocks as close to their original state as possible. After all, these are family heirlooms with sentimental value,” explains David.



## KEEPING THE FIRE BURNING

Situated in the far west of Singapore, Thow Kwang Pottery Jungle certainly lives up to its name. Fringed by greenery, the ceramics workshop exudes a bucolic *kampung* (village) vibe that's far removed from most of the metropolis. It's a jungle, too, in the sense that it's home to many things curious and colourful – in this case, finely wrought vases, bowls and other ornamental wares, both made in-house and sourced from across China.

Taking pride of place in the workshop is a 36m-long traditional dragon kiln – so named for its sinuous shape, and for the way it breathes smoke during the firing process. "It was made from brick and clay in 1940, and is the oldest remaining dragon kiln in Singapore," Tan Teck Yoke explains.

The affable 61-year-old is the second-generation owner of Thow Kwang, having taken over the reins from his father in 1980. "As the eldest son, I felt that it was my responsibility to carry on the business. My father put a lot of hard work into it, and it would be a waste if his efforts amounted to nothing."

For the past four decades, Teck Yoke has been managing Thow Kwang with his wife, 59-year-old Yulianti. Besides sculpting, importing and exporting ceramics, they also conduct pottery workshops to fuel appreciation for the craft.

They're now supported by their niece, 26-year-old Stella Tan, who joined full-time in 2013. As a child, Thow Kwang was her playground. "I have so many fond memories of this place. I grew up moulding clay into toy figurines," she reminisces.

Stella stresses that it is important for the business to stay within the family. "This is a legacy that my grandparents passed down, and only family would fully understand the significance of sustaining this tradition," she says.

As a third-generation ceramic artist, Stella looks to inject fresh ideas into this traditional trade. Besides helping her aunt and uncle run pottery workshops, she also manages Thow Kwang's social media channels and sells her own wood-fired creations at flea markets and bazaars. "There are so many opportunities to explore," she says. "I want to reach out to more people and promote this traditional art."



The kiln at Thow Kwang is fired three to four times a year. Recycled wood is used to stoke the kiln to 1,260°C and up to 5,000 ceramic pieces are placed in the dragon's "belly". The ash and smoke react with the clay to produce a unique blush of flame, making each piece truly one of a kind.

THIS SPREAD,  
FROM LEFT:  
STELLA, TECK  
YOKE AND  
YULIANTI RUN  
THOW KWANG  
TOGETHER;  
FIRING UP THE  
DRAGON KILN;  
SUNGEI ROAD  
LAKSA'S  
TRADEMARK DISH







## FOOD FOR THOUGHT

While the Michelin Guide may have started bestowing stars on Singapore hawker stalls last year, the threat of extinction for the traditional trade is still all too real.

“Hawker food is a culinary legacy that’s an integral part of who we are,” says KF Seetoh, TV personality and founder of food guide *Makansutra*. “But rental and food costs are rising, and there’s a lack of manpower to assist ageing hawkers.”

According to the government’s recent Hawker Centre 3.0 Committee Report, the average age of hawkers in Singapore is 59 – and looks set to keep rising. Long hours and tough conditions are putting off the next generation, who’d rather opt for the relative comforts of an office job.

Thankfully, there are still members of the younger generation determined to keep hawker culture alive. Take, for instance, Coffee Break at Amoy Street Food Centre, run by siblings and third-generation owners Jack, Faye and Anna. Read our interview with them on [silkwindsmagazine.com](http://silkwindsmagazine.com).



## HERITAGE EATS

### CENDOL GEYLANG SERAI

Enjoy handmade *cendol* (coconut milk dessert) served with traditional condiments like rice flour jelly noodles. **#02-107 Geylang Serai Market**

### ROLINA

79-year-old owner Tham Niap Tiong makes Hainanese curry puffs entirely from scratch. **#01-33 Serangoon Garden Market**

### SUNGEI ROAD LAKSA

The rich laksa gravy – which is cooked over a charcoal fire – is a standout here, as is the wallet-friendly price of just S\$3 per bowl.

**#01-100 Blk 27 Jln Berseh**





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To produce Nanyang-style coffee, robusta beans are first wok-roasted with margarine and sugar (Lam Yeo uses 80% coffee, 20% margarine and sugar) under high heat, before being processed. This particular roasting method is believed to have stemmed from the Hainanese immigrants who first came to Singapore in the 1800s.



**THE PERFECT ROAST**

In a little shophouse tucked along Balestier Road, the Tans have been plying their trade for the past 50 years and counting, making traditional coffee powder the best way they know how: first roasting the beans with sugar and margarine, before passing them through a vintage steel grinder. The resulting powder produces a robust, heady brew that is often referred to as Nanyang-style coffee.

Lam Yeo (Hokkien for “Nanyang”) was founded back in 1959 by Tan Thian Kang, a former newspaper editor who started out selling coffee beans door-to-door from the back of a van. In 1960, he managed to secure a shophouse in Balestier; the rest, as they say, is history.

Today, Lam Yeo is one of the last family-run traditional coffee roasters in Singapore. Helming the store are 69-year-old Tan Bong Heong, who took over the business from his father in the 1990s, and his wife Hon Moi Chai, also 69. Their son, 45-year-old Benny, joined in 1995, when he noticed that his dad needed more help.

“I used to be in the T-shirt printing business. When I first started helping out at the store, I treated this as just another job,” admits Benny. “Over the years, however, I’ve developed a greater interest. Recently, I started introducing more gourmet coffee beans to cater to a wider range of tastes.” Lam Yeo’s catalogue now runs the gamut from traditional blends to specialty beans sourced from countries like Ethiopia, Colombia and Brazil.

Modern coffee iterations aside, Lam Yeo still retains its nostalgic charm. A pair of vintage grinders and an analogue kitchen scale form a tableau of sorts

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: LAM YEO’S TRADITIONAL COUNTER SET-UP; MOI CHAI, BONG HEONG AND BENNY ARE THE PROUD FAMILY BEHIND LAM YEO

in the middle of the shop; old-school plastic mugs, long-spouted pots and framed burlap coffee sacks line the walls and shelves. “I would say that today, 90% of the shop looks exactly like it used to,” says Benny.

Despite the rise of trendy third-wave cafés and modern brews, Benny feels that Nanyang-style coffee will always have a place in Singapore. “In Singapore, we grow up drinking kopi. It’s part of our culture,” he muses. “It’s not so easy to change taste buds. At the end of the day, there will always be a demand for traditional coffee.”



**SINGAPORE NATIONAL DAY**

Join in the fun as Singapore celebrates its 52nd birthday on 9 Aug. If you aren’t able to get coveted tickets to the National Day Parade, here are three alternative spots to watch the spectacular fireworks and flypasts.

**MARINA BARRAGE**

Pack a picnic or grab some finger food at popular hawker centre Satay by the Bay, before settling down on the barrage’s grassy roof. It offers great views of the city. [pub.gov.sg/marinabarrage](http://pub.gov.sg/marinabarrage)

**ESPLANADE WATERFRONT**

The Parade takes place at The Float @ Marina Bay; as such, the surrounds will undoubtedly be packed. Head over to the bars and restaurants around the Esplanade Theatre instead. [esplanade.com](http://esplanade.com)

**SMOKE & MIRRORS**

Many rooftop bars offer great views of the action, but few afford guests as good a perspective as this beautiful cocktail venue atop the iconic National Gallery Singapore. [smokeandmirrors.com.sg](http://smokeandmirrors.com.sg)

Photo by AARON LOW (Iaksa, previous page)