

# Answering HUNGER'S CALL

Entrepreneurial students are venturing into the food business to cater to hungry stomachs. **Ng Lingkai, Irwin Yeo, Cheong Kah Shin** and **Poon Chian Hui** go on a food hunt to find out more

## Wrap & Jam

STUDENTS can now find supper on campus, thanks to a new student-owned food stall, Five-12 at Canteen 11. It opens from 5pm to 12 midnight, from Thursdays to Sundays. Student entrepreneurs Garvin Tan and Cheng Chuan Lim, both second-year Civil and Electronic Engineering students staying in Hall 11, spotted a demand for supper on campus after talking to many who experienced supper woes like themselves.

"Supper shouldn't be such an inconvenient affair," said Chuan Lim, who was not satisfied with having to travel for at least 15 minutes out of NTU by foot to get to the nearest supper places.

Food was a whole new ball game to Garvin and Chuan Lim. The part-time swimming instructors forked out their personal savings to turn their dreams into reality. The duo went through a series of "waffle experiments" across six weekends to get their recipe right, mixing different combinations of ingredients. With an emphasis on healthy eating, they do not grill their hotdogs or prata wraps with extra oil. Their waffles contain less butter and coconut milk than that of their competitors.

"It was a time-consuming process but when we got down to it, at least we knew our plans for the stall were not all talk and no action. They were going to come true," said Garvin.

Though first-timers, Chuan Lim and Garvin meant serious business, even experimenting



with the types of lighting. "The original fluorescent light by the previous owner made our food look pale and unsavoury. We went with an orange-yellow lighting for a warm tinge," said Garvin. The pair also hand-painted the stall sign.

The hotdog wrap is an all-time favourite fusion food: a Western hotdog wrapped in Indian instant prata. "The waffles are so-so, but the hotdog wrap is very innovative," said Business student Oh Zhi Wei.

Customers customise their own hotdog wrap by choosing sauces like mustard, mayonnaise, chilli and barbecue. Hall 11 resident Angela Han said: "They are very generous with the sauces, no extra charge for more."

Bold plans are afoot. Come December, al-fresco candlelight dining might be possible in the courtyard area outside Canteen 11, with live-music performed by NTU's own jam bands. "It'll be a great avenue for NTU jam bands to practise performing in front of a live audience. Not to mention it will really promote student activities at night," he said.

## High five for Canteen 5

ARMED with a degree in Mechanical Engineering from NTU, Ernie Lee could have rode on the swelling economy and found himself a well-paying engineering job. The 27-year-old, however, took over the management of NTU Canteen 5 in July this year.

Said Lee: "I was never really keen in engineering; instead, I was interested in business management, particularly if it is F&B related."

It was this interest which led him to Canteen 5. The Office of Facilities Planning and Management (OFPM) had decided not to renew the expired contract of the previous owner and interested parties were invited to tender for its management.

Lee then bid for it, got it, and made changes to the canteen - by bringing in various food stalls, using bright signs, and replacing old tables and chairs.

Recreational facilities like a pool table and sound systems playing pop music were also introduced.

"Basically, the challenge is to make Canteen 5 look younger and more modern, so students would have a reason to come," said Lee.

"The whole place is airier and there is a wider variety of food sold," said Hall 5 resident Chen Qin. "It looks much better than before too."

Lee, however, admits that the going does get tough sometimes.

"As I do not have prior experience in F&B management, there were many things which I had to learn, especially in the beginning."

His efforts are paying off, though, as there had been "marked improvements in business", since he took over management.

Setting his sights far, Lee said he also plans to tender for the management of Canteen 9. He has submitted a proposal to OFPM and results will be made known in November.

If the tender for Canteen 9 is successful, he intends to invite big names like Botak Jones to set up a stall in the canteen.

Currently, besides Canteen 5, Canteen 2 is also owned by NTU graduates.



FRYING UP A STORM: The cook from Zi Char Uncle's stall cooks up yet another plate of his famous seafood hor fun.

## Lunch on the GO

CANADIAN pizza caught many students by surprise when it was sold during lunch rush-hour on the Wednesday before recess week.

Two booths, one beside 7-Eleven and the other in Canteen B, were the idea of five students who wanted to cater to students who did not want, or had no time, to queue for lunch.

"We looked at the queues in Canteen A, and thought we should come up with an idea to solve the problem," said Seemanti Mukherjee, 20, a second-year Accounting student.

She and four students from the Minor in Entrepreneurship

programme - Rason Lee, Neerada Valsan Poduval, Lim Jun Ling, and Lim Xueping - decided to sell fast food in NTU.

The initiative was part of their course project work, in which they had to set up a real business. They brought in 26 boxes of extra large pizzas in three flavours and sold each slice at \$2. Although they started late, the pizzas were sold out just over an hour later, to staff and students.

Their profits, about \$150 in total, did not go into their pockets but will be used to set up an entrepreneurship club, said Mukherjee.

"There's a lack of variety of fast food in NTU, so students will welcome such an idea," said Xueping. Indeed, students liked



the service. Biomedical Sciences student Eugenia Ong, 20, said it would add more variety to the selection of campus food available, but added that "the price must

be right as well".

The students are now exploring other fast food options, such as Subway sandwiches.

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## Zi Char Uncle

HOSTEL residents no longer have to put up with junk food to satisfy late-night hunger pangs. A pair of enterprising 22-year-olds have started a late-night zi char delivery service for most NTU halls. NTU Accountancy student Lee Chian Ming, together with his friend Lim Ze Yan from NUS Engineering, hit upon the idea while chatting over coffee one night.

Their brainchild, Zi Char Uncle, provides an alternative to fast food at night, offering dishes such as hor fun and fried rice. Taking orders through text messages, the duo deliver in bulk at staggered times for each hall. Hall residents have to go to a collection point, usually the lobby or the carpark within their

hall as listed on its website [www.zicharuncle.blogspot.com](http://www.zicharuncle.blogspot.com) to collect their food.

However, they are currently not delivering to Halls 4, 5 and 7. Hall 7 is too difficult to work into the delivery route due to its location, and Halls 4 and 5 are near a hawker centre at Blk 259. "Ah Fang", that opens till 2am, so "these residents may not see a need for Zi Char Uncle," said the student entrepreneurs.

Relying on their friends to give out flyers, the business has received good response. "The food is fantastic," said Hall 6 resident Nicholas Toon, 23, a second-year Maritime Studies student. "The portions are huge and they are not stingy on their ingredients. It even arrives hot."

The website, [www.zicharuncle.blogspot.com](http://www.zicharuncle.blogspot.com), garnered over 2,000 hits in its first four weeks. The site lists menu items and provides information on delivery timing. "There are menu rotations and daily specials to keep customers interested," said Ze Yan.

Through his business, Chian Ming realised that students can be demanding customers. Some do not collect their food punctually, making it hard for them to complete the next delivery on time, while others have asked for special dishes like hokkien mee with no seafood but only pork. "We usually cook everything in a large batch before packing them for customers - these requests mean we have to make single portions separately, which is troublesome for the chef," explained Ze Yan.

While food is provided by a hawker in Lakeside, which they declined to name for business interest, the owners oversee the operations themselves. Balancing their studies and the business is tough, but the two friends have found a way to manage - the student entrepreneurs usually do their schoolwork after making their delivery rounds.

Running a business together is not easy, but both take problems in their stride. Said Ze Yan: "We have quarrelled over even the smallest things, but in the end things turn out fine because we have known each other for a long time."

In fact, Ze Yan is no stranger to running his own business, having managed a tuition coordination service before he started Zi Char Uncle.

Chian Ming and Ze Yan are now looking into expanding the business to NUS. But they have to take their exams into consideration first.

"We need to hire more staff during the exam period. We need to study too!" Chian Ming joked.

