

NUS, NTU spicing up food options for students

Expansion of food fare part of aim to build self-contained campuses

Yuen Sin

Gone are the days when grabbing a meal on a university campus meant standing in line at a canteen stall, with options limited to basic hawker fare like mee siam, chicken rice or briyani, or in fast-food outlets such as Kentucky Fried Chicken and McDonald's.

Dining options at Singapore's older university campuses have expanded widely in recent years, as

more students stay put on campus to socialise, study and attend a myriad of activities.

At the National University of Singapore's (NUS) Stephen Riady Centre in University Town, for example, one can find trendy desserts such as durian vanilla Belgian waffles or Korean bingsu, made from shaved ice, at the cheekily named Butter My Buns cafe.

A hop over to Nanyang Technological University (NTU), off Jalan Bahar, yields finds of a bar dishing up Japanese udon noodles, and well-known Chinese restaurant Peach Garden.

And even Singapore Management University (SMU), in the

heart of the city, has its own offerings, such as the student-run SMOObar, which hosts music performances and an array of activities like pool, darts and beer pong.

The number of food and beverage outlets at NUS has increased by close to 50 per cent over the last decade, said a spokesman. It will have 66 stalls across all five canteens by the year end, five foodcourts, and 41 restaurants, cafes and kiosks.

The NUS spokesman said that this expansion caters to its growing student and staff populations, and is "in tandem with NUS' aim to build a modern self-contained campus that is carefully designed to enable students to live, learn, play and

dine conveniently without having to travel out of the campus".

NTU, long bogged down by perceptions that it is isolated and offers limited options for leisure, hence the nickname "Pulau NTU", has also undergone a major revamp over the past two years as part of its push to become a "mini city".

The northern part of the NTU complex, also known as the North Spine, now has a supermarket, a salon, banking options, performance spaces as well as popular eateries.

Mr Jimmy Lee, NTU's chief housing and auxiliary services officer, said that over the past four years, the number of F&B outlets on campus has doubled to about 50.

At NUS, some students have become involved in the running of F&B outlets. There are now six food outlets on campus run by students or alumni, an increase from just two in 2012. A spokesman said NUS sees an advantage in supporting students and alumni who would like to test out food concepts on campus because of their familiarity with the environment, and is open to them trying out such concepts despite a lack of experience. However, all such proposals are still evaluated based on merit.

Some students, like third-year NTU electrical engineering undergraduate Ahmad Farid Jumari, 24, have also chosen to work on campus. For the past two years he has been a barista at an NTU Starbucks outlet where he works between 16 and 20 hours a week.

"I have become more knowledgeable about coffee, and I have learnt a lot about the importance of communication skills and learnt how to work with different people from my colleagues, who range from polytechnic students to older workers in their 50s," said Mr Farid.

yuensin@sph.com.sg



More than 300 customers, usually students and faculty, visit The Coffee Roaster at the National University of Singapore every day. The cafe, a business set up by Mr Ang Swee Heng (below) and his mother, moved to NUS' Block AS8 last August after it started as a hole-in-the-wall coffee bar in Tanjong Pagar in 2014. ST PHOTOS: FELINE LIM

Student runs coffee outlet on NUS campus between lessons

Final-year business undergraduate Ang Swee Heng spends an average of 12 hours a day at a cafe at the National University of Singapore (NUS) almost every day.

But the 23-year-old is no seat-hogging student.

Rather, he is the proud owner of a speciality coffee shop, called The Coffee Roaster, which had its beginnings as a hole-in-the-wall coffee bar in Tanjong Pagar in 2014.

Mr Ang, who had just finished his national service then, was deciding if he should start working or make other plans. Meanwhile, his mother, who was a tuition teacher, had been looking for a career change.

The duo, who have a passion for coffee, decided to take "a leap of faith" and open the cafe despite having minimal experience.

Save for attending a basic coffee-making course, what they knew of their trade was learnt mostly by trial and error and from YouTube tutorials, said Mr Ang.

"For taste, we also relied a lot on customer feedback at the start, figuring out a balance (in the coffee) that customers like and would keep them coming for more."

But profit margins in the Central Business District were slim due to high overhead costs. By a stroke of luck, Mr Ang found out that his own university had been tendering for

an operator to run a speciality coffee outlet.

The Coffee Roaster then moved to NUS' Block AS8, near the Central Library, in August last year.

Setting up shop on campus made managing the business a lot easier for Mr Ang, who usually oversees operations in the cafe from when it opens at 7.30am to closing time at 6.30pm. He leaves only when he has classes or lectures to attend.

Business has picked up as word of mouth spread about the cafe's speciality coffee, as well as its other offerings of pastries, sandwiches, salads and soups.

Now, more than 300 customers, usually students and faculty, visit the cafe every day. There are seven other staff at the cafe besides Mr Ang and his mother.

"Our philosophy is to deliver speciality coffee and make it affordable and accessible. Our most expensive drink is only \$4.30," said Mr Ang, who said that the business is already making a profit.

The only challenge he faces is the fact that footfall will dip during school holidays.

As an undergraduate himself, a strategy that he thinks may work out would be to find other ways for The Coffee Roaster to be involved with student life during this period.

"For example, we could work



closely with school camps and orientation event organisers to sponsor products, or offer products at wholesale prices for fundraising events."

NUS communications and new media undergraduate Ng Yu Hui, 25, goes to The Coffee Roaster about twice a week.

"It's very conveniently located next to the study areas, and I think the coffee is much better than that at bigger chains like Starbucks."

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WALLET-FRIENDLY

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MR ANGSWE HENG, final-year business undergraduate and owner of The Coffee Roaster.