

One-stop foodie haven

A new online emporium devotes itself to discovering indie food and kitchenware to help elevate domesticity to an art.

By May Yip

YOU might not need a concrete paperweight in the shape of *png kueh*, or a US\$200 chopping board engraved with a banana and five mangosteens, arranged to resemble our national symbol of five stars and a crescent moon. But a visit to Batch (www.batch.sg) certainly makes you feel like you do. The freshly-launched online gourmet platform is designed to connect food lovers with the products lovingly crafted by independent food makers, chefs and kitchen artisans. You won't find mass-produced supermarket goods here – every item is carefully handpicked for quality and taste by founder Debbie Yong.

"It was while covering the rise of local foodmakers – a growing group of Singaporeans who make preservative-free granola, jams, *sambals*, nut milks and so on, that I saw how many of them struggled to handle their own sales and marketing channels because they have to juggle these on top of their day jobs, on top of making the food," says Ms Yong, who has been covering the food beat for *The Business Times* for the past three years. "It then led me to think: why not gather all these artisanal products at a one-stop shop, like an online store?"

Ms Yong pitched the idea to the management of Singapore Press Holdings, which granted her seed money under the company's business incubator scheme to develop her e-commerce site. She has since amassed a wide range of craft food and kitchenware, including a "Batch X" line of exclusive collaboration items created just for the site like a special Singapore Sling-inspired granola flavour by Eastern Granola, chef Shen Tan's *sambals* and Restaurant Labyrinth's balsamic jam. While there are specialty products created by chefs like a set of chef and steak knives by The Tippling Club chef-owner Ryan Clift, or a double boiler conceptualised by Justin Quek and local design agency Artifela, you don't have to be a Gwyneth-wannabe to enjoy the site.

"I'm at the age where most of my friends are married or getting married and moving into their own homes," explains Ms Yong,

29. "They are cooking together more often, growing their own gardens, and buying more things for their kitchens and living spaces – and looking for resources to help them do so."

The site also serves as a resource for home cooks and foodies looking for recipes and ingredient features, with plans to include behind-the-scenes interviews and videos with food makers and chefs – designed with the aim of building a virtual community of foodies of all levels. Ms Yong hopes to tap on her close ties with local chefs and food personalities within the Singapore F&B industry to dispense useful kitchen tips on the latest food trends such as cold-brewing, cooking with Himalayan salt slabs, or barrel-ageing your own cocktails at home. Meanwhile, her childhood friend and civil-servant-turned-stay-home mum Stephanie Lim contributes recipes and home entertaining tips to Batch.

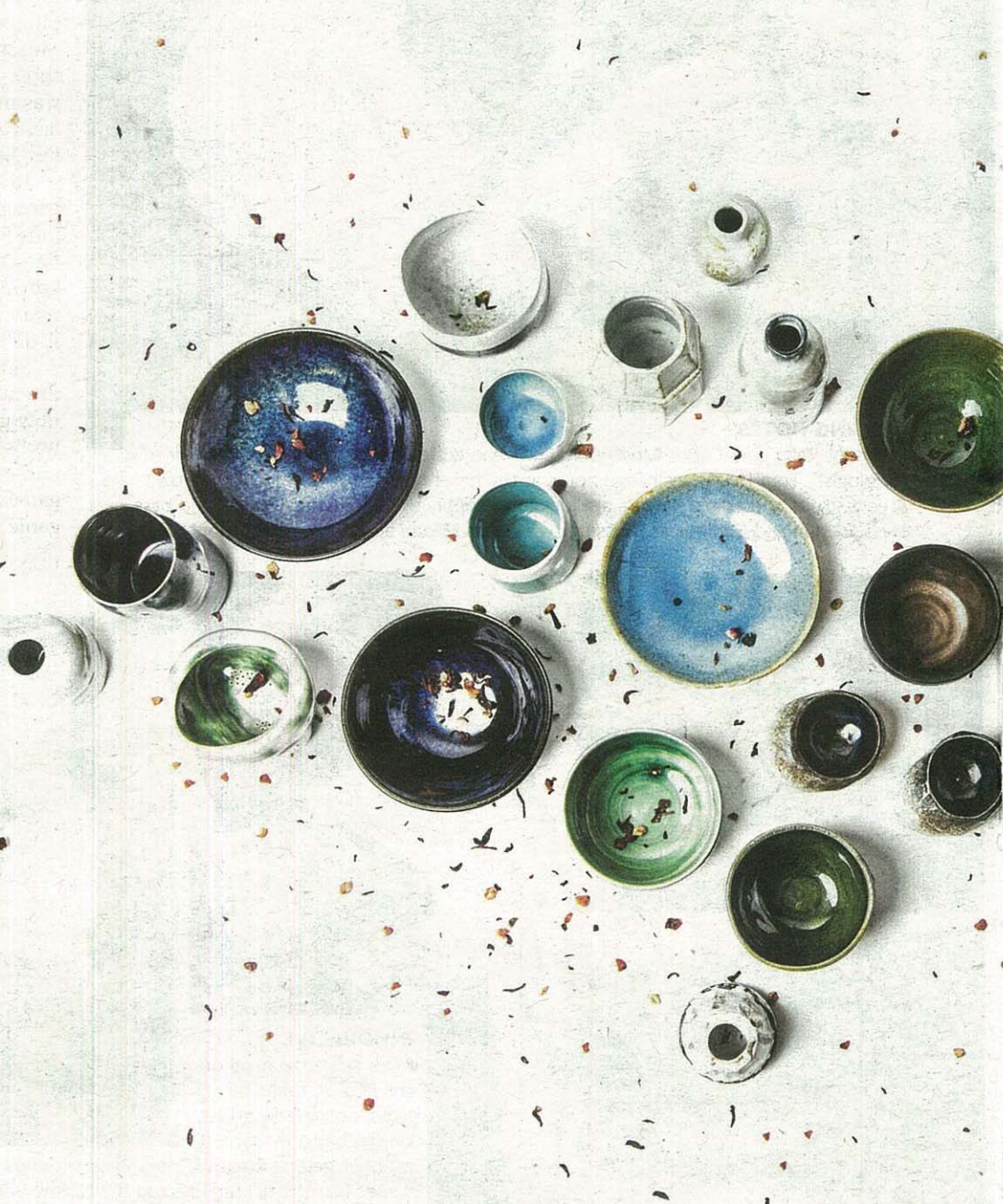
Such a pool of expert suggestions, designed for budding or full-fledged domestic gods and goddesses, helps maximise the mileage of each purchase. The site even includes a range of cookbooks for those hoping to expand their gastronomic repertoire to impress guests at dinner parties. "From my own experience, I know that after splurging on a S\$20 bottle of premium sauce or S\$200 for a handcrafted chopping board, I would want to use them in the best way possible," says Ms Yong. "So we work directly with leading bartenders, chefs and craftsmen to offer recipe suggestions and usage and storage tips for each item."

Want to try the products out the old-fashioned way? Ms Yong is also in discussion with a few partners to launch retail pop-ups for Christmas. In the meantime, here's a peek at the craftsmen behind the thoughtfully designed products.



MS YONG

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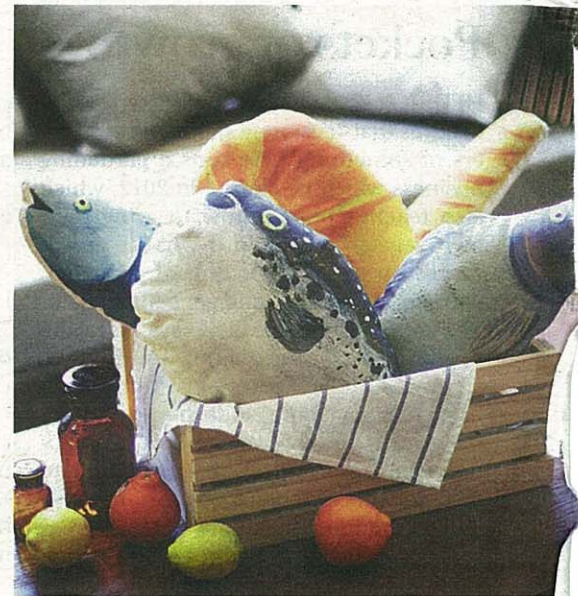


Gracesmiths

ESTHER Ang's story of making a leap from a successful corporate career to being a first-time entrepreneur is not unique. What stands out, however, is the idea for Gracesmiths, which uses art and design to create everyday lifestyle products inspired by the Christian faith. Rather than a literal interpretation of her beliefs, however, Ms Ang's products are utterly contemporary with a healthy dose of cheek.

"I came up with the creative concepts for most of the products, normally while having showers," reveals Ms Ang, who started her lifestyle product company in 2012 after working in several top Fortune 500 companies.

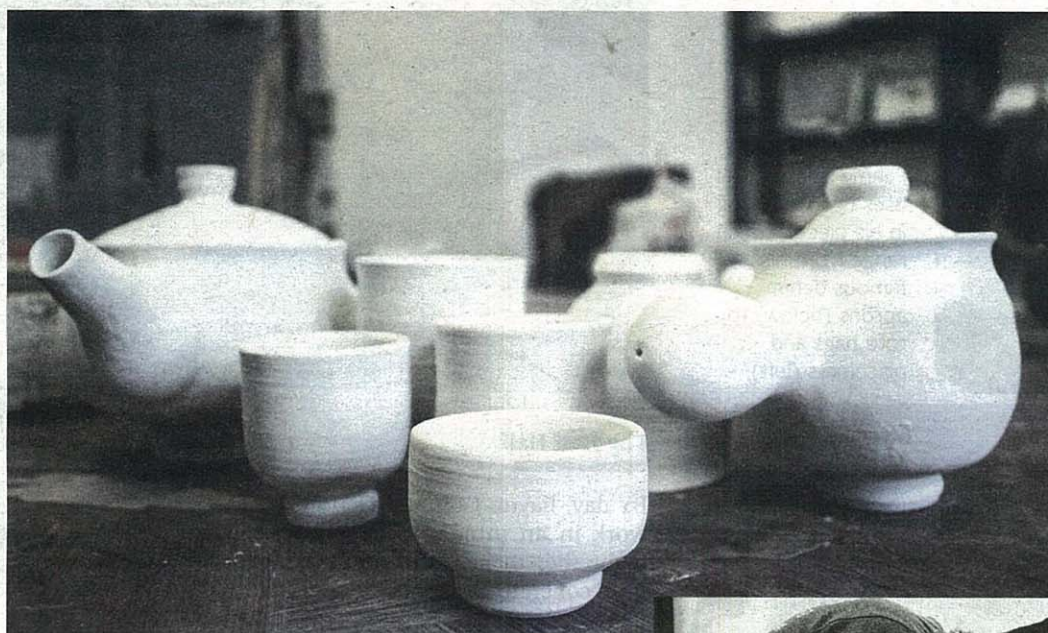
"For example, the Providence range of cushions available through Batch was inspired by the story of how Jesus multiplied five loaves of bread and two fish to feed multitudes of people. Daily provision resonates easily with peo-





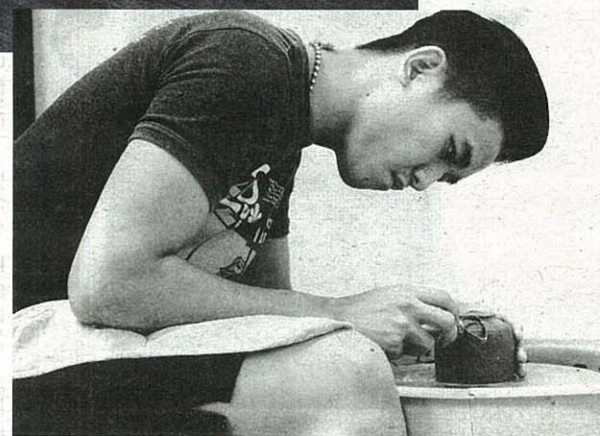
NATURE-INSPIRED

Ms Lee (left) set up Studio Asobi after picking up pottery with her husband a year ago. She works from home, which allows her time to go out into the parks and neighbourhoods to get inspired by nature and people. Below: Her creations laid out to form the shape of Singapore



PASSION FOR CERAMICS

Mr Leow (right) is a third-year student at Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts majoring in ceramics. His works (above), which bear a distinctly Japanese aesthetic, have already been shown at the recent 16th International Chawan Exposition, a showcase for ceramic arts



the Providence range of cushions and pouches locally. Seeing how the work has benefited her, she expanded the concept by providing financial support to disadvantaged women in Singapore through sewing work.

She adds: "There's a special authenticity about items made with hands that a commercialised, mass-produced item cannot replicate. I think it's because each item carries with it a piece of the maker's heart and soul."

Zestro Leow

STILL in his third year as a fine art student at Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts, majoring in ceramics, Zestro Leow has already shown at the recent 16th International Chawan Exposition, an international showcase for ceramic arts.

"I believe clay is not just a medium in art; it is a matter that is constantly changing," says Mr Leow, who is selling some sake sets, vases and plates through Batch. "With excess water, it transforms from solid into slip. Allowing the clay to evaporate its moisture will change its consistency. Within the process of creating a ceramic artwork, understanding the consistency of the clay is the most important issue."

Having first majored in western painting, Mr Leow was introduced to ceramics through an elective course and developed a strong passion for the medium over time. His pieces bear a distinctly Japanese aesthetic, raw and organic at first blush, yet exuding a refined, beautifully conceived vision when held and appreciated.

"Nature has inspired me a lot," says the young ceramist. "Besides the different forms and textures, I look into what is beneath the surface of nature."

Beyond serving as decorative objects or vessels, Mr Leow hopes to communicate his hard work, energy and innermost workings as an artist to an audience. "When people observe my artworks, I want them to appreciate the entire journey of creating an artwork from scratch, and not just the final presentation that is before them," says the driven, down-to-earth student.

"I believe that the audience should appreciate an artwork by studying its concept and craftsmanship. This will enable the audience to look into the process of how an artwork is created, and hence, look forward to more amazing works to be created by the artist."

Studio Asobi

WHAT started as a fun activity to be enjoyed with her husband grew into a full-time career for Lee Huiwen, a home-

grown ceramist who creates one-off, nature-inspired works. It all began a year ago, when the Singapore Management University business graduate, who was in real estate business development before working for a non-governmental organisation, took a sabbatical.

"My husband and I picked up pottery because we wanted to learn something together," explains Ms Lee. "We had just gotten married but were so busy with our careers that we hardly had time to do anything as a couple. He had a great experience doing pottery in secondary school and was very convincing!"

She picked up the craft in Singapore, but it was only when she enrolled in an immersive programme in the pottery town of Tajimi, Japan, that she decided to take the plunge and become a ceramist.

"The lifestyle there is simple but extremely fulfilling," recalls Ms Lee. "People grow their own vegetables and the young potters I met are really dedicated to their art, staying humble and cheerful even though their income is not always forthcoming. My *sensei* is 74 years old and still shows up daily to work and teach and feast with his students."

Now, she works from a home studio which allows her time to go out into the parks and neighbourhoods to get inspired by nature and people. The actual building, drying, firing and glazing process can take anything from a few days to a few weeks. And although her business, Studio Asobi, was founded only a few months ago, she has experienced a growing interest in ceramics, especially from young working professionals in their 20s and 30s. Ms Lee also sells her works to ceramic collectors, as well as others who are looking for functional wares or presents.

After several friends requested to be taught the basics of ceramics, she started a monthly workshop, aimed at giving beginners a hands-on experience with making their very own clay vessel.

"It was daunting at first, but gradually I convinced myself that if I have found something beautiful, there is no reason why I shouldn't be sharing it with others," says Ms Lee. "And it brings me a lot of joy to see the smiles on people's faces when they discover the hidden artist within themselves!"

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CONVERSATION STARTER

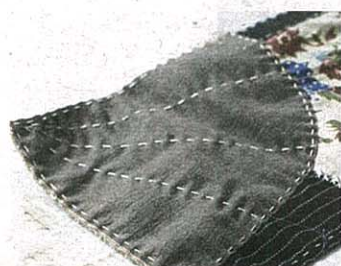
Gracesmiths' Providence range of cushions (left) was inspired by the parable of how Jesus multiplied five loaves of bread and two fish to feed multitudes of people

ple, especially in a high-cost living country like Singapore!"

Each design is a conversation starter, like the puffer fish and croissant-shaped cushion used to represent the loaves and fish in the parable, and also has an element of social consciousness – the pieces are, for example, hand-sewn by disadvantaged women from the Mother and Child project.

While it is important for the business to be commercially sustainable, the businesswoman tries to improve lives through the enterprise and started out by hiring a seamstress who is from the lower-income group to sew

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QUALITY CRAFT

Fahmy Ishak of FIN uses Boro stitching in his pieces, which range from his famous denim aprons (below) to tote bags and placemats (left)



FIN

AFTER getting attention for his detail-orientated denim bespoke aprons, Fahmy Ishak invested in his passion for Japanese Boro stitching and denim and started his own label, FIN, working from his Holland Village apartment. The artisan, who laboriously hand-stitches his customised products, has been doing this since 2012.

Mr Fahmy, who left his job as a retail manager at Maison Ikkoku to pursue his passion full-time, created his first apron for a barista colleague who was attending the World Barista Championship. His apron didn't go unnoticed, and soon other baristas and chefs alike were asking for bespoke aprons. From these humble origins, he has now moved on to include some of Singapore's top restaurants like Wolf, Bincho and Toby Estate Coffee, as part of his clientele. "It really took off after that, so I decided to take a gamble and leave my job to work with fabric full time," says Mr Fahmy.

He's had a passion for collecting fabrics ever since he was a child, when his mother first encouraged him to sew. He admits: "I learnt to stitch when my mom got fed up with me for bringing home more scout badges for her to sew."

Through the years, he developed a passion for denim and the Japanese art of Boro stitching. "The Japanese don't waste any leftover fabric, and in fact they can create many different patchwork pieces by using what we would normally consider as waste. It's a great way of making sure everything is used and nothing is thrown away. People often bring me their broken jeans and I fix it with patchwork, it's like giving new life to old things," he reveals.

He uses Boro stitching in his pieces, which range from his famous denim aprons to tote bags and placemats. Hand sewing each product, the artisan is able to achieve quality and detail that would not be possible by machine. Even though the process is time consuming, he admits: "There is no race to the end, as each process is an experiential journey for me. I'm always happy and a little sad when the final product is complete, but the journey continues with the product's new owner."

For more information visit FIN on Facebook. Denim aprons and Boro placemats can be found on Batch.sg

By Lisa Fratini

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CONCRETE CREATIONS

The Half Half's Cube concrete desk lamp (left) and mooncake paperweight (below). Unlike clay, a medium that can be shaped by hand, concrete requires greater planning because, once cast in situ, the design cannot be changed

The Half Half

BY day, Jiayun Goh and Dennis Quek work in an interior design firm. By night, they make lamps and tableware from concrete that would fit perfectly into industrial-chic homes. The unique concept was launched a year ago when they were hunting for a unique Christmas present that was simple, functional and affordable.

"With the increasingly common, standardised and almost flawless lifestyle products flooding the market, we decided that a handmade item, although imperfect, is the magic touch to a perfect gift, knowing that no two products would be the same," says Ms Goh. "With that as a goal, we took weeks to conceptualise and research on working with the seemingly simple material. And our very first Cube concrete desk lamp was born."

The use of off-form concrete, more commonly employed in architecture, gives the brand an edge over other decorative ceramics on the market, and the minimalist aesthetic is achieved through rigorous craftsmanship and execution of the form work when the concrete is cast.

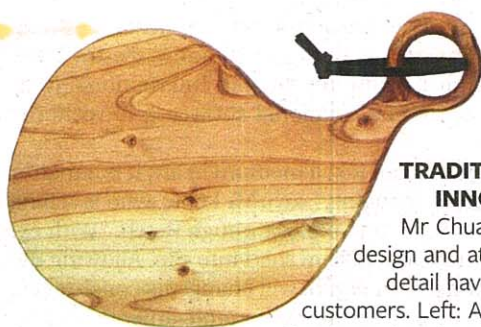
"The simplicity and honesty of material with no plastering or frivolous finishing is something we love and as-



pire to achieve," says Ms Goh, whose mooncake paperweight and coasters are available through Batch. "We are self-taught through researching about this material online and experimenting with different proportions, different ideas and creating a mess with it."

Unlike clay, a medium that can be shaped by hand, concrete requires greater planning because, once cast in situ, the design cannot be changed. As basic as it may seem, the duo is constantly experimenting with the subtle variations in shades of greys and finishings. It takes weeks to conceptualise each product, beginning with sketches and prototypes, before refining a customised mould, curing, demoulding and sanding down to create the final finish.

"The texture, strength, weight and individuality that comes from concrete itself makes every piece unique," adds Ms Goh, who reveals that each product often looks heavier than it really is. "Increasingly, people are accepting concrete and loving them for their imperfections. We wouldn't really refer to this as faddish. Instead, we would say that there is an increasing appreciation for the details that are put into the design of the furniture and products."



TRADITION AND INNOVATION

Mr Chua's modern design and attention to detail have won him customers. Left: A Plane and Bevel wooden chopping board

Plane and Bevel

IT'S not common for a 27-year-old to leave a secure job to join the ageing profession of carpentry, but one young man saw an opportunity to modernise and rejuvenate the craft. Rafie Chua graduated in business from Melbourne University, but decided to trade the office for a workshop and use his talent to create bespoke woodwork furniture and pieces.

As a third-generation carpenter, he grew up observing and helping his father with the business. However, he never considered it a career path until he went to university. "I went to university because it was expected of me, but when I finished I felt that working in a bank was not something I wanted to do for the rest of my life," says Mr Chua. In fact, he couldn't keep his hands off woodworking even during university. He jokes: "I made my own furniture for my house at university. It actually saved me a lot of money!"

Leaving banking behind, he started his own chair and table renting company, to cater to events like weddings. Working in the rental business made him see the demand for customised furniture, which prompted him to start his own carpentry and woodworking business, Plane and Bevel, named after two tools used in woodworking.

He started posting photos of his work on Instagram,

which slowly caught people's attention, and soon requests for customised furniture came pouring in. Unlike most older woodworkers and carpenters in Singapore, Mr Chua's modern design and attention to detail combines both tradition and innovation. Through his work he aims to demonstrate how carpentry isn't an obsolete craft just for the older generation, with his pieces varying from dining tables to the more modern typography desk art and wooden chopping boards.

However, he does admit that while he may be a breath of fresh air in the craft, he still hasn't quite acquired the same experience and knowledge of the older generation of woodworkers. He says: "I receive a lot of advice from older carpenters and my father. They really help me better my business and my skills."

To view Mr Chua's products and for enquiries visit Plane and Bevel on Instagram or email at planeandbevel@gmail.com. Wooden chopping boards are sold at Batch.sg

By Lisa Fratini

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Exclusive Business Times and Batch giveaway

Stand to win a handcrafted stoneware sake bottle and cup set from local ceramist Zestro Leow (worth \$60) simply by liking and sharing Batch's Facebook page. For more details on how to take part in this online giveaway contest, log on to www.facebook.com/batchsg