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BTT

BERITA TAN & TAN

VOL. 21 2017

The Philosophies of Interior Design: Picking the Middle & Imperfect Path

XBN PB 15/04/2018 (0321061)

there's plenty of

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EDITOR'S NOTE

In a museum, the curator is a conscientious storyteller; he or she chooses pieces for their individual value and their contribution to the story at large. Not many of us take time to purposefully assess, select and arrange the pieces of our lives—our home and surroundings, the food we eat and the friends we keep. If our lives were a museum exhibit and we the curator, would it be able to captivate audiences? More importantly, would we look upon our 'work' with satisfaction?

In this issue of Berita Tan & Tan, we are appropriating the term 'curate' and exploring 'living a curated life'. We speak to diverse individuals who are 'curators' to some degree in certain aspects of their lives, from their work to their hobbies and their health. Through their stories, we invite our readers to pay attention to the everyday details of living. Perhaps then, we can build them into a life of meaning and purpose.

We at Tan & Tan Developments would like to wish everyone a meaningful and purposeful 2018!

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BTT

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Counting Blessings at Park Manor



It is easy to take the blessings in our lives for granted. We remind ourselves of the finer points of Park Manor – an exclusive development by Tan & Tan Developments, tucked away in a quiet corner of Sierramas – through numbers.



Park Manor offers the sheer luxury of space in its 3-storey family homes of 5,470 sq. ft. to 6,980 sq. ft. Each villa is complemented by a private lift that chauffeurs your family to the 5 to 6 bedrooms and the spacious living rooms on every floor. Exclusive to only 41 families, this freehold estate has a beautiful landscaped jogging path, a clubhouse, children's wading pool, as well as an infinity edge lap pool and lounge deck.

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twin vanities is the secret to a happy marriage.



3 storeys high and a large balcony area to make the most of the view.



a 30-minute swim amidst lush landscape is a luxurious escape.



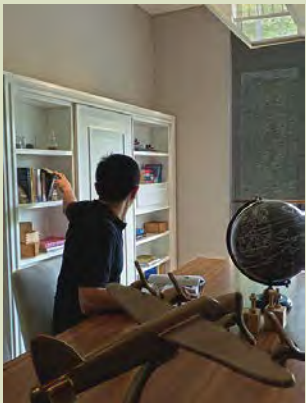
10-feet tall ceiling and windows as high, to let the light into the living room.



"How do I love thee?
Let me count the ways."

~ Elizabeth Barrett Browning

two more family areas and pockets of space scattered around the rest of the house.



one or two glasses of wine to celebrate a happy home and a fulfilling life.



Havens for Hobbies

Sometimes you just want to sequester yourself and play with your toys. Having a dedicated hobby room - where you can have all your equipment, material or collection in one place - is one of the greatest indulgences you can allow yourself at home. Here are some hobby room ideas that could give you ideas of your own:-



*For the oenophile:
A Wine Room*

Having a place to store and display your impressive wine collection is an oenophile's idea of heaven. Walls lined with wine cabinets and racks, and finely tuned temperature and humidity, would display and preserve those rare and expensive vintages. A bar- or lounge-style seating lets you and company indulge in a bottle or two.



*For the aspiring artist:
An Art Studio*

Creative juices flow in natural light and plenty of fresh air. Paints, oils and chemicals land everywhere when you are creating your masterpiece, so washable wall paint is a must and the furniture should not be fancy. A small sink installed in a corner would be an added convenience to wash those brushes and clean up spills.



*For the budding musician:
A Recording Studio*

A simple setup could suffice for a home music studio, but the key to recording high quality sound is the acoustic treatment. Most rooms in residential homes are built with low ceilings and sound-reflective surfaces, requiring a combination of acoustic panels, bass traps and diffusers to transform the room into a bona fide recording studio. Let's not forget sound-proofing too, to prevent sounds travelling both ways.



*For animal lovers:
A Mini Zoo*

Pets are just like any other member of the family - they need their own personal space. Different considerations have to be taken for different types of animals: you would need natural or artificial lighting; a climate control system and the right type of cages, aquariums or terrariums, or a large enough space for them to roam freely.



*For the avid golfer:
A Golf Room*

You don't have to stow away your golf clubs when the weather is foul. With a combination of indoor putting green and simulator, you can play an entire game of golf, from tee to green, in the comfort of your home. Invest in a high-definition simulator and you'll find yourself transported, every evening, to some of the most renowned golf courses in the world.



*For kids of all ages:
A Lego Workshop*

LEGO is a hobby for kids of all ages - from tiny tots who are just discovering the use of their fingers to dedicated adult collectors. A perfect LEGO room would have sufficient shelving to organise the myriad of bricks, parts and mini-figurines, a large enough table for assembly as well as plenty of display space for those gigantic Taj Mahal and Millennium Falcon sets.



*For those who appreciate cultures:
A Culture Room*

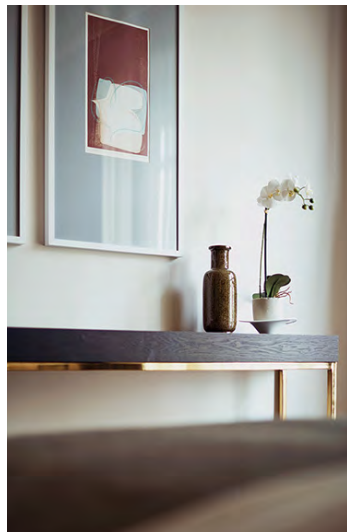
If you are a sinophile, anglophile or take a keen interest in any culture, here is a brilliant idea: a thematic room in which you can place your collection of cultural accoutrements. In this room, you can immerse yourself in the culture that you so admire and also have a safe place to keep your collection of paintings, vases, furniture or other such priceless acquisitions.





The Philosophies of Interior Design: Picking the Middle & Imperfect Path

BTT peels back interior design movements with **Geoffrey Thomas**, Managing Director of Geoffrey Thomas Associates, and reveals the motivations of those who follow them.



It is about finding the middle ground in everything: not too much, not too little.

"You'd be surprised how interior design trends are greatly influenced by the political, social and economic situations of the day," says Geoffrey. "When times are good, there is a great showing off of wealth through interior design; when times are bad, people go out of the way to hide it."

"I was just reading about how in New York, the rich now are almost embarrassed to display their wealth, but it used to be quite the opposite," he says, and cites Tom Wolfe's *The Bonfire of the Vanities* as art imitating life exactly. The novel is set in New York in the eighties, a period when Wall Street was booming and money flowed freely; those who profited enjoyed and displayed opulence and excess. The novel describes the main character Sherman McCoy's extravagant Park Avenue apartment:

"The floor was a deep green marble, and it went on and on. It led to a five-foot-wide walnut staircase that swept up in a sumptuous curve to the floor above. It was the sort of apartment the mere thought of which ignites flames of greed and covetousness under people all over New York and, for that matter, all over the world."

Towards the end of the story, though, the characters were ripping fineries off the walls. The dichotomy described in the novel seems to still exist today.

Geoffrey has been called upon to work his magic on interiors from London to Kuala Lumpur, and he has seen enough to make this conclusion: "The class system still prevails. Think of the time when aristocrats ruled the classes—which has been brought into popular consciousness by *Downton Abbey*—they were the learned who lived in great homes, with libraries and large dining rooms. People are, in many instances, aspirational when it comes to how they decorate their homes."

"In London, especially, which attracts new wealth from around the world, there is a clear sense of visible wealth," he says. When pressed to elaborate what he means by "visible wealth", he divulges: "Well, they want the sprawling dining table and a complete array of cutlery to feed 20 people. But do they *really* need that many?"

And then, there are design trends that are, as Geoffrey puts it, "a reaction to society".

"Such as the one in Sweden now," Geoffrey explains. "They call it *lagom*." *Lagom* has pervaded the Swedish way of life and is the lifestyle buzzword being bandied around in the past year; it is about finding the middle ground in everything: not too much, not too little—like the running theme in the story of *Goldilocks and the Three Bears*—but achieving what is 'just right'. The world of interior design has embraced this approach with wide open arms.



Geoffrey Thomas



"*Lagom* is all about a balanced lifestyle, which is how the Swedes live. Translating that to the home environment, you will find that there is the use of a lot of natural fibres and sheepskins rugs, and technology is kept completely out of the bedroom."

Adding momentum to the movement are prominent public figures, such as Victoria Beckham, who bought a house in West London back in 2013 and enlisted celebrity friend and interior designer Kelly Hoppen to style her new home. Hoppen's style embraces symmetry and is inspired by modern Japanese design, but halfway through renovations, Beckham performed a designer swap in favour of Rose Umiacke, who is described as being a master in finding the balance between opposing characteristics—old and new, light and air, simplicity and refinement—very similar to the ethos of *lagom*.

From the East, there is a different movement that seeks perfection in imperfection, or as the Japanese calls it *wabi sabi*. In modern society, where youth and beauty are held in high regard, and there is a constant race to keep things new and fresh, *wabi sabi* asks that we celebrate that which is weathered, worn and incomplete; it holds that which is naturally occurring and unpretentious in high regard.

Coincidentally, on a recent holiday, Geoffrey visited the 12th century castle and home to Belgian interior designer Axel Vervoordt, who is very much inspired by *wabi sabi*. In fact, Vervoordt wrote an entire book titled *Wabi Inspirations*. Several rooms in his castle home had been redone in the 'way of wabi', with peeling walls and unassuming natural objects—such as natural stones and timber found on the castle grounds—being brought into the rooms to add texture and warmth.

In Malaysia, there appears to be a coalescing of these trends. "There are those who still go for the clichéd colonial and mid-century modern themes. Items for those themes are actually difficult to source in Malaysia. Unlike in places like the States, where one can go to flea market or shop online for these things, they are hard to find here and if you do find it, it's very expensive."

"One request that I frequently get from clients from Malaysia recently is hotel references. The client travels to different parts of the world and takes pictures of the hotel room, and tells me to recreate it."

Geoffrey tries to steer them away when the request is impractical. Besides the holiday accommodation and home being two different environments with different needs, it is not always practical to recreate design in another part of the world. "If you wanted

a Balinese design in your home in Malaysia, sure, that's fine. But you cannot bring it back to somewhere where there's four seasons, for example. Go for your holiday and enjoy the room there, but don't bring it home."

Another trend that has swept across Malaysia is the polished concrete floors and industrial look, that make up the ambience of many a restaurant, cafe and home across Kuala Lumpur. ("This is very much influenced by the Sri Lankan architect, Geoffrey Bawa, I feel," says Geoffrey.) Pre-war shophouses are being converted into hip hangouts, with peeling paint, chipped tiles and exposed bricks intentionally left untouched; these imperfections are the charm of the design, which rings similar to the philosophy of *wabi sabi*.

From what Geoffrey shares with us, it sounds like he practices a blend of *lagom* and *wabi sabi*—he doesn't go extremely minimalist nor over-the-top extravagant, and encourages sincerity and non-pretension. "Interior design should not be a staged set," he says.

"I like to start with a minimalist base—but not a plain white wall—then start adding layers. I might scatter some antiques, and then later add in a cutting-edge metal table next to an old piece."

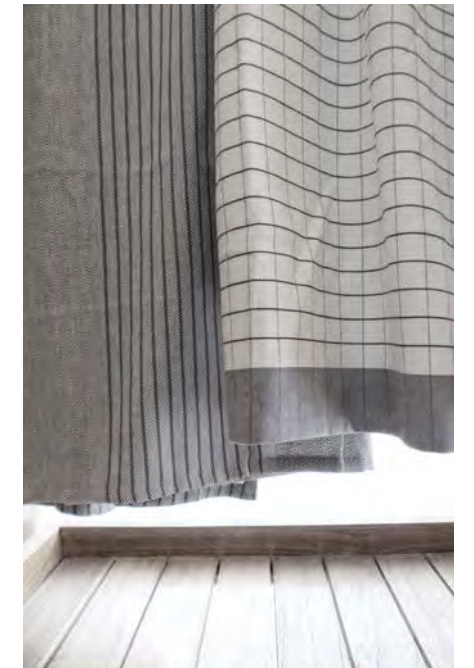
No white wall? "Because it is very cold. You can introduce patterns with wallpaper... or paint the ceiling. I've done a pale blue ceiling and it does wonders for the room."

He doesn't think that the interior design project should end when he has dusted his hands. "I ask my clients to accumulate things along the way, and buy things that *they* like. You don't have to have everything bought and displayed on the shelves when you move in."

In line with *lagom*, Geoffrey knows to save and splurge in equal measure ("You can use lining fabric, and get a good curtain maker to sew it for you") and to make things *just right* ("If a couple is living together, customise two chairs—one for each").

There is one thing that Geoffrey will never find a middle ground for. "Massage chairs. Don't ask me to find a place for your massage chair. Place it wherever you like after I have left."

Visit www.gta.my to find out more about *Geoffrey Thomas Associates*.



Wabi sabi asks that we celebrate that which is weathered, worn and incomplete.

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THE MAKING OF
AN INCURABLE
ART COLLECTOR:

A CONVERSATION
WITH

Pakhrudolain Sulaiman



Pertarungan



Ruang Pemula (or RuPe) is not your run-of-the-mill art gallery. It feels like you have stepped into the cosy living room of an art collector, who has displayed his favourite works for the enjoyment of his guests. Sculptures, paintings, ceramics and framed photographs are not immediately discernible from furniture and fittings, and you almost forget that you are on the fourth floor of a shophot. When the team from BTT arrives, **Pakhruddin Sulaiman**, one of Malaysia's leading art collector and owner of RuPe, welcomes us warmly as if receiving us into his home.

"You can be a collector, or you can be someone who just appreciates art," Pakhruddin starts off by telling us. "Art collecting is associated with the wealthy, and to an extent, it does. But you don't need money to appreciate good art."

For a time, Pakhruddin was the latter. Coming from a humble home in Hulu Langat and being the son of a rubber tapper, his exposure to the art world started only when he went to London in the early eighties to study law. "The cheapest form of entertainment there were art galleries and museum, which were free to enter." He spent his leisure time strolling amongst some of the greatest artworks in the world and began developing an eye for good quality art. "To be discerning towards art, one must see a lot of it."

When he returned to Malaysia and began working in a law firm as a "wage-earner who didn't make much", as he puts it, his transition into a collector began. Together with his late wife, Datuk Fatimah Sulaiman, who shared the same profession and passion for art, they began growing their collection spurred by each other's enthusiasm.

One of the earliest pieces that Pakhruddin bought was a painting from Raja Azhar Idris's (now owner of Art Case Gallery) early Dance series, before Raja Azhar became renowned for his work with coloured glass. Pakhruddin was taken by the potential of then up-and-coming artists, like Bayu Utomo Radjikin and Amron Omar, whose pieces he could acquire for a few thousand ringgit back then. Today, their works fetch much more.

"I gravitate towards bold pieces that seem to reach out from the canvas and grab me, while my wife liked softer themes; I like Picasso while she liked Matisse." As we ponder on each item in the gallery, we try to distinguish the ones that were Pakhruddin's picks and which were Fatimah's, but it was not discernible—much like Picasso and Matisse's styles, which were different but shared an underlying fearlessness.



PERTARUNGAN

1997

oil on canvas
170 x 154cm

Amron Omar

Pakhruddin explains, "At first glance, you would simply see two figures in a silat battle. The Islam term *jiha*d has often been misinterpreted; to me, it's the struggle to better oneself. On closer inspection of the painting, you will notice that they are the same person. The artist has painted himself fighting himself."

“

BROTHERS

1995

oil on canvas
220 x 160cm

”

Bayu Utomo Radjikin



When a new artist piques his interest, Pakhruddin avoids developing too close a relationship with him/her. “I try to collect objectively, so I don’t want to be influenced by the friendship. Of course, as I continue to follow the artist’s development, it cannot be helped.” The relationship of patron and artist inevitably transforms into friendship. Pakhruddin shows us a picture on his phone of a birthday present, gifted to him as a surprise from an artist—a portrait of Pakhruddin, which captures his youthful spirit incredibly well. It is evident that Pakhruddin is touched by the gesture.

Pakhruddin refers to the nineties, when he and Fatimah started their collection, as the ‘golden age of art collecting’ in Malaysia. “There were fewer competitors bidding for art, and fewer still who wanted ‘museum pieces’—large, bold works that depict the human condition—these were not pretty pictures to hang on the wall at home. Now, collectors love them and I have to fight for the pieces I want.”

Pakhruddin has a clear criterion on how to select a piece of art to add to the collection: “If thinking about it keeps me awake at night, then I know I must have it.”

When queried on the number of art pieces he now owns (“Hundreds?”), Pakhruddin chuckles: “Hundreds upon hundreds. I’ve lost count.”

Pakhruddin has thus far sold only a few pieces from the collection as part of his on-going trimming process. “I’ve had very tempting offers, including from overseas institutions, but so far, I cannot let them go. Very *sayang*. They are irreplaceable; even though I can purchase something similar from the same artist or series, they would be more expensive now, and they just wouldn’t be the same.”

Besides the numerous art pieces in RuPe, one cannot help but notice the vast collection of books in the same space. The books are mostly on art, but Pakhruddin tells us that this is just a part of his more extensive collection at home, many of which are titles of fiction. “I suppose collecting art is an extension of my love of books.”



His interest in collecting started first with books, long before art came into his life. “When I was waiting for SPM results all those years ago and looking for something to occupy my time, I got my hand on a second-hand copy of War and Peace. It fascinated me. Such a spellbinding story told so beautifully.”

Pakhruddin still owns that first book which sparked the bibliophile in him. He particularly likes English novels authored by those for whom English is a second language, such as the likes of Salman Rushdie. “I suppose I harbour a secret desire to be an author, although I have only written on my art collecting activities.”

“Those who can’t write, collects?”, we ask in jest, and he obligingly agrees before quipping, “And those who can’t paint, collects! I can’t paint either!”

Pakhruddin travels far and wide to devour more art. This year is a fortuitous one as three of the world’s greatest art exhibitions coincide—the Venice Biennale, the quinquennial Documenta in Kassel, Germany and the decennial Skulptur Projekte Münster in Münster, Germany—and Pakhruddin did not miss out on them, coinciding his holiday travels with these events, as well as the Istanbul Biennial in Turkey.

However, despite his far-reaching admiration for art from around the world, he only collects Malaysian art. “It was what I started with, and I already accumulate so many! Imagine if I allow myself to go beyond this ‘boundary’...” When he tells us this, we had already made our way into another unit, which he uses as storage, in the same building. We gingerly make our way through a labyrinth of canvases and sculptures, which has us in awe—stacks upon stacks of art are leaning against the walls and on the floor, all awaiting their turn in the limelight.

“I’m planning for a purpose-built space that can be used for storage and exhibition. When completed, I’ll have rotating, thematic exhibitions, with a few pieces loaned from others to supplement my own.” That is something for us to look forward to, and the Malaysian art scene to be better for it.

“

PUISI JIWA IV

2007

acrylic on canvas
135 x 259cm

”

Bayu Utomo Radjikin

“

**THE FAMILIAR
STRANGER NO 21**

1997

bronze
39 x 33 x 30cm

”

Chin Wan Kee



Pakhruddin Sulaiman

pedalling with a purpose



CYCLING AS A HOBBY HAS RISEN IN POPULARITY IN MALAYSIA, AND THE PELOTONS OF RIDERS WHO TAKE TO OUR ROADS IS NO LONGER A STRANGE SIGHT. WHY DO PEOPLE TAKE TO PEDALLING WITH SUCH EARNESTNESS? BTT SPOKE TO **CHUA SENG YONG**, EXECUTIVE ASSISTANT TO GROUP MD (OF IGB CORPORATION), WHO SHARES HIS VERY PARTICULAR AND PERSONAL REASON.



...because with his determination, it is already done.

It was on 10 July 2016 that Chua got back in the (bicycle) saddle again. After a terrifying accident on his bicycle and the 22 minutes that followed, of which he has no memory of except he somehow managed to still find his way home, Chua did not continue his regular exercise of biking around his neighbourhood.

Two years later, however, while having dinner with family, which included his brother-in-law, an avid cyclist, the topic came up. Chua agreed then to join his brother-in-law the next day. "In my younger school days, I represented Negeri Sembilan in tennis and several other sports. But, that night when I committed to join them in cycling, I weighed 115 kilogrammes," he said. "It was time to do something about it."

The next morning, not even bright yet and very early, he lugged his heavy mountain bike to the start of the route to Genting Sempah, a popular route amongst local cycling enthusiasts. His brother-in-law, his nephew and another friend would be his first cycling companions. "I told them to go ahead and not wait for me. I was monitoring my heart rate to make sure I wasn't pushing myself too hard. I didn't want to get a heart attack!"

So the trio went on their merry way, and left Chua to make his way uphill, slowly but surely. Along the way, younger and fitter cyclists cruised past. Chua laughed as he recalled those moments:

"They were cheering me on 'Uncle, don't give up! You're almost there!'"

Meanwhile, Chua's cycling companions had made it to the peak in slightly over an hour, cycled farther on and had breakfast at McDonald's, before returning to the peak to look for him. "In the end, it took me 2 hours and 10 minutes to reach the peak."

Despite the tough start, Chua was just at the start of his fitness goals. "I set a goal of reaching a body weight of 95 kilogrammes within a year—an achievable goal."

Soon, he bought a road bike, more suited for road cycling and his needs. "I didn't need one that looked good, because that doesn't matter to me. I'm not going for speed, so I didn't need one with aerodynamic design nor one that was superlight. I am only going to get older, so I didn't need one that would hurt my back from bending over for long hours. So, finally I bought myself a Canyon sportive bike that weighs around 8 kilogrammes."

Chua's regular ride nowadays is the 40-kilometre route along the Guthrie Corridor Expressway. "It has an excellent motorbike lane, which makes it a safe and an enjoyable route. Getting off the GCE onto LATAR Expressway, one can cycle to Kundang market for wonton noodles and Kundang Jaya, one of the developments under IGB Corporation."

With every ride, Chua found his stamina improving; soon, he was catching up with his fellow cyclists; eventually, he was riding astride. "It was important to me to be able to keep up with the group and still enjoy the ride," he said. Now, though, he sometimes rides ahead of the pack and encourages the rest to keep up.

While cycling with a group provides motivation, Chua's real driver to push forward was his own fitness goal. Throughout the entire year, he hit plateaus when his weight would refuse to budge. Chua faced the ruts in his fitness journey strategically: "That's when I think of D.I.F., which stands for Duration, Intensity and Frequency. If I wanted to move past the plateaus, I had to cycle for longer, faster or more often."

Chua achieved his goal weight, just two weeks shy of the deadline. He returned to Genting Sempah slightly over a year after the start of his cycling journey, in August 2017. "This time, I finished in 1 hour 5 minutes," Chua said.

In the same month, he completed his longest ride ever, a 100-kilometre route to Genting Perez (also known as Peras)—as if that doesn't sound exhausting enough, it involves over 1,200 metre elevation gain; in other words, long and steep uphill climbs. Chua faced it the same way he faces any challenges—with strategy.

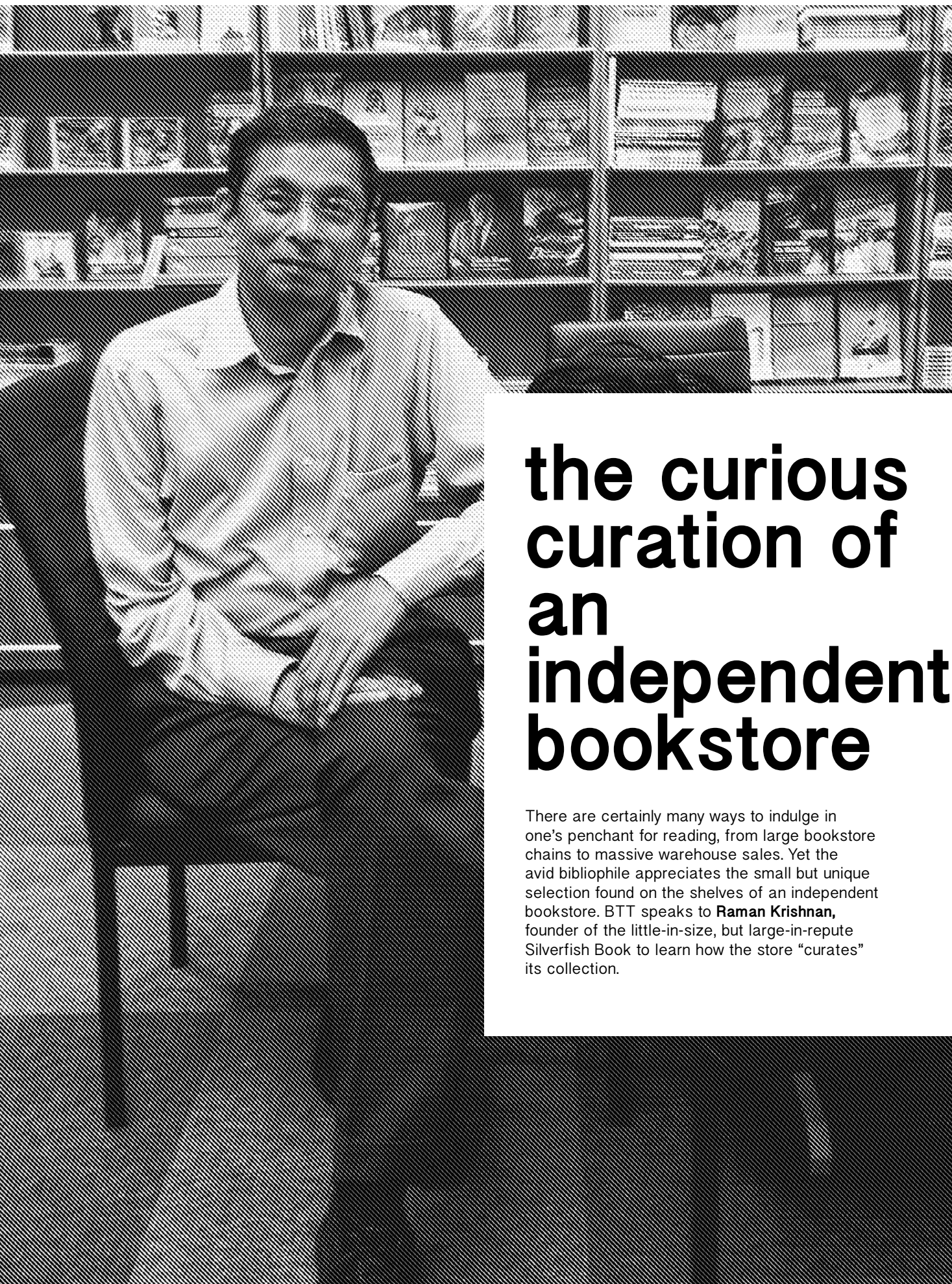
"I looked up the route and I knew where the difficult parts were. It was just a matter of pacing myself," he shared. "The real challenge starts at the 60-kilometre mark. I saw some cyclists speed off at the start, and I knew that their energy would be depleted before then. True enough, I cycled past some who had to get off their bikes and rest." Chua reached the end in 4 hours and 40 minutes.

Now that he is healthier and fitter, he has begun to pick up other sports again. "For the first time in 30 years, I jogged for 5 kilometres the other day," he said. "My knees have stopped hurting, and my blood pressure is normal."

So, has Chua reached the end of his fitness journey? "I've set myself a new goal—90 kilogrammes by 10 July 2018," he said. Then, he nodded confidently, because with his determination, it is already done: "It's achievable."



Chua (front, far left), with his cycling buddies.



the curious curation of an independent bookstore

There are certainly many ways to indulge in one's penchant for reading, from large bookstore chains to massive warehouse sales. Yet the avid bibliophile appreciates the small but unique selection found on the shelves of an independent bookstore. BTT speaks to **Raman Krishnan**, founder of the little-in-size, but large-in-repute Silverfish Book to learn how the store "curates" its collection.



Q1 How do you source the titles and what are your selection criteria?

We have about 5000 titles in the shop, and we source them locally and from overseas. The criteria for selecting the books is a little complicated: we choose books based on our own reading experiences, and those recommended by respected reviewers and our well-read customers. A curated collection of books is one that is based on knowledge and taste. Silverfish Books' collection is based on good literary fiction (from all over the world, not just Anglo-American), history, general science, culture and Malaysia. As for our criteria, there are only good books (that is, important books that you should read) and ones that are not worth your time. A general reader is overwhelmed by millions of books out there. What does he/she choose? How does he/she navigate? The "go to" option is, normally, to stick to familiar territory. A curated shop like Silverfish Books is meant to create a path through the seeming chaos. Most of our customers are impressed with our depth and width of our collection, to be able to find books not available in any other bookstore in Malaysia. (Many exist overseas, mostly independent.)

Q2 How has your selection of titles influenced your customers and vice versa?

Our customers range from the mildly curious to the hardcore "book explorers"; "curated" bookshops display a range that might interest them. Many of our customers are "stuck" in their reading habits, and keep reading the same thing for years or decades. Many prefer it that way, but those with discerning taste want more. We provide the adventure. Our selection has certainly been affected by our customers, but not in a frivolous "trending" way. We trust our customers' taste and they trust ours. They recommend good books to us all the time. In a sense, although they influence us, we reinforce each other.

Q3 With the above question in mind, how has the reading trend changed over time?

We, and our customers, are not interested in "trends", which are temporary. A good book (new or old), or a good story, lasts for hundreds or thousands of years. They are often perceived to be "difficult" and dry, but they are not.

The formats available have changed with time, but reading good books has not.

📍 Silverfish Books Bangsar Village II, Jalan Telawi 1 Bangsar, 59100 Kuala Lumpur.

TOYS ARE NOT JUST FOR BOYS

WHAT KIND OF PEOPLE SPEND A SMALL FORTUNE BUYING TOYS, WELL INTO THEIR ADULTHOOD? ARE THEY ADULTS WHO NEVER GREW UP? ARE THEY SOLITARY AND NERDY, AS WE ARE INCLINED TO IMAGINE? BTT MEETS WITH ONE OF THEM, AND HE DEFIES THE STEREOTYPE, PROVING TOY COLLECTORS ARE COOL.





LOO Wey Loong welcomes us into his tastefully decorated home, or more accurately, his kitchen as the main entrance leads directly into it. “Cup of tea?” he offers. We’re here to see his toy collectibles, but linger in the kitchen admiring the standing cabinets, reminiscent of antique food cabinets, with wire mesh instead of glass panels that keep the food fresh but the flies away.

“I had it repainted to match the walls,” he says. Loong is a second-generation upholsterer, but dabbles in furniture-making for selected clients. Naturally, he employed his expertise and resources when he furnished his own home. He is beefy and bearded, and still rolls up his sleeves to work alongside the other artisans in his workshop. He is as adept at restoring furniture as he is at cooking a great meal. The kitchen, in the home that Loong shares with his wife and 10-month-old son, is clearly his dominion as he bustles around preparing refreshments for us.

We are going to find out that besides being a collector of robots and Legos, Loong put a lot of thought and effort into curating his home. But first, we must go see what we came here for. The baby is sleeping somewhere in the house, so we make our way quietly up the stairs, towards his ‘man cave’. Before we arrive at it, we walk along the landing of the first floor where the entire length of the wall is covered by hundreds of Minifigurines, Lego’s series of articulated figures. A shelf-lined wall at the end of the corridor is covered with iconic buildings from the Lego Architecture series.

When we enter his display-cum-computer room, we are not surprised to see that most of the space is used to display his toy collection. A large custom-built cabinet houses large Lego sets from the Star Wars series, the only series that he collects (besides the sets of iconic landmarks we had passed by outside). “I had to have this cabinet specially made. The standard cabinets are not deep enough for the sets,” Loong explains.

His prized Lego possession, though, lies at the centre of the room – a Millennium Falcon. “I bid for this on eBay...on my wedding day,” he admits. “There’s photographic evidence of my wife glaring at me, hands on hips, while I was staring at my phone.”



On another wall, filled from end to end and top to bottom, is his collection of Soul of Chogokin robots, characters from seventies and eighties anime shows, brought to life as die-cast metal figures. “I bought my first robot when I started working. It stood alone on my shelf and looked so lonely. So, I started filling the shelf. 20 years later, I now have over a hundred robots and must have spent over 200,000 ringgit on it.”

New figures are released a few times every year, but Loong curates his collection as a true collector does: “I cannot tell you how I choose which one to add to my collection. When I see it—” he puts his hand over his heart “—I just know.” Still, there is some kind of method, or limit, to his madness. “They release a new figure and then variations of it. I’m quick to decide if I want the first figure of the series, and then mull over the variations.”

Loong also has an advisor, of sorts. “If I’m undecided, I’ll ask my wife’s opinion. I’m very lucky that she supports me. Many of my fellow collectors’ spouses are not so enthusiastic,” Loong says. “I actually came close to selling off my entire Lego collection, but she talked me out of it.”

You might imagine that collecting toys is a hobby done and enjoyed in isolation, but the reality is quite the opposite. “I have a group of friends who are Lego as well as Star Wars fans. Every so often, they would come over. I would cook for them, and we would come up to my hobby room and eat and drink, and talk.”

His fellow robot enthusiasts, on the other hand, is an international community of motley members, residing all over the world. Loong has never met most of them in person, but after years of chatting in an online forum, he has made friends from Europe, USA, Hong Kong and Japan, whom he would otherwise would never have interacted with.

TOP
Loong (left) distracted on his wedding day as a Millennium Falcon was up for grabs on eBay.

BOTTOM
Larger sets from the Lego Architecture series.

TOP
An entire wall is covered with Loong’s die-cast Soul of Chogokin robots and more.

BOTTOM LEFT
The priced Millennium Falcon from the Lego Star Wars series.



CLOCKWISE
Gunbuster

Custom-built
cabinet houses
enviable pieces
from the Lego Star
Wars series.

(left to right)
DX Chogokin
Mazinger and
DX Chogokin
Great Mazinger.

"We would help one another acquire toys from our side of the world. The guys from Japan would help me buy my robots and I would help them get Legos and Sideshow Collectibles (figures of movie and television characters, like Superman, Batman and such). I've gotten to know them very well, and we even share bits and pieces of our personal lives."

In fact, Loong has gotten to know very intimate details of the lives of some of these people. "There was a fellow collector who needed money for medical treatment, so he had to sell his robots," Loong recalls. "I meant to buy only one, but when he opened the boot of his car, he had a series of them in it. So I bought the whole lot."

We return to the kitchen, the visit proper completed, where we continue to admire his home. The kitchen island and the dining table, the two main features of the space, were made to Loong's very precise specifications. Clearly he has a different approach to his hobby and his home – one instinctive and the other with acumen. He has to start preparing dinner for his family.

Loong's son has awoken by now and joins us, in the arms of his mother. Loong says, "I do hope that he would like to continue building daddy's collection and we can do it together one day."



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BTT GOES TO PENANG

— an Invitation from The Wembley - St Giles —



During the British rule, Wembley Park was a lively venue at the centre of Georgetown, where theatrical troupes from Europe to America, and even Chinese opera, would entertain the locals. In its place today is The Wembley - St Giles Hotel, which takes its name from the site's historical vocation, as well as Cititel Express; both hotels are managed by CHM and are fairly new, having only opened in 2015. When BTT received an invitation from the CHM management to visit Penang and experience The Wembley for ourselves, the team jumped at the chance.

The Grab car driver that picked us up from the Penang International Airport was one of the chatty ones. He told us he was from Seberang Perai, the mainland part of Penang, which together with the island made up the entire state.

"It used to be easier," he said, when we asked about his work as a ride-hailing driver. "Now there are many more drivers, much more competition." Bad news for him but, we would later discover, good news for us.

Half an hour later, we drew up to the shade of the hotel porch. We were relieved to escape the afternoon heat and into the lobby.

While waiting for the Front Desk personnel to complete the check-in procedure, we helped ourselves to the complimentary cold nutmeg juice, a beverage that, as far as we know, can only be found in Penang; it was just what we needed to recover from the heat.



Relaxing with complimentary refreshments while being checked in.

Refreshed, we went up to our room on the 26th floor. Upon entering, it was the view outside the window that seized our attention first. Laid out below us were red-tiled roofs of old shophouses blending in with pockets of greenery, and the sporadic high-rise building. Beyond that, the Penang Strait separated the island from the mainland Peninsular Malaysia; ships dotted the waters, moving across our view on their way to rejoin the Strait of Malacca.

We could see the First Avenue shopping mall facing the hotel; although we did not expect to be doing any shopping on this trip, we would find it convenient



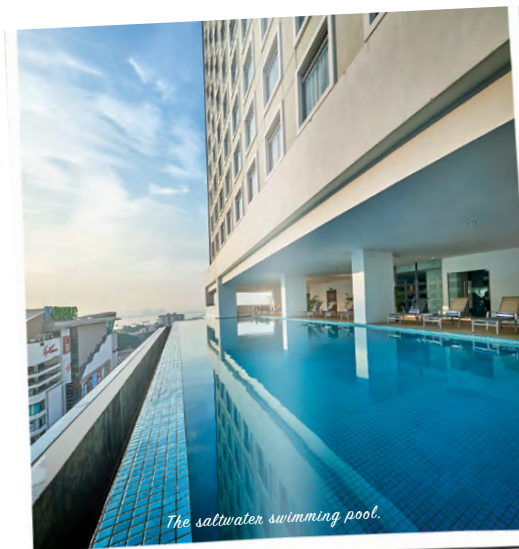
later when we needed to buy a pair of shoes, having not packed well for the trip.

It was still early evening but the bed was too inviting, and we lolled in it for a while, staring up at wallpaper behind the bed, thinking that it brightened up the room much better than the customary piece of art that hangs above hotel bed headboards. On the verge of falling asleep, we dragged ourselves out of bed and into our swimming outfits, not wanting to waste time on this short trip.

The pool was on the third floor, where the gymnasium and health centre were also located. With each stroke and lifting of the head to take a breath, we caught a glimpse of the iconic Komtar tower that stood tall nearby. The warm water felt oddly denser than usual, and we recalled reading in the information folder earlier that it was a saltwater pool.

Realising that, we didn't shower too thoroughly when we returned to the room (saltwater is kinder to the skin) and got ready to go out again for dinner. Deciding on where to go for dinner took a bit of deliberation - there

were many options available within walking distance or a short car ride away. We settled on the Duck Kway Chap, flat noodles served in a braised meat broth, just an 8-minute walk away on Lebuhr Kimberly.



With our bellies too heavy to walk with, we called for a Grab Car to bring us to a popular drinking place on the other side of town, and later another to send us back to the hotel. There were enough drivers waiting for riders, and we never had to wait to find one. Each ride costs only 4 to 6 ringgit if you are going around town, which made it affordable and incredibly convenient.

We started the next morning at the Wembley Café with a hearty plate of Asian and Western cuisines from the breakfast buffet spread. The morning patrons at the café were a mix of business travellers, and families and couples on holiday; together, they created an unobtrusive hum of excitement in the air. We were excited to get on with our day too.

Before we left the hotel, we wanted to check out the shopping arcade that connected The Wembley to Cititel Express. The first shop that greeted us was filled with rolls of cloth and dress mannequins. The shop attendant and owner, Narain, had inherited the business from his father who in turn inherited it from his father, a migrant from India.

"My grandfather set up a very successful business importing textile. Over the years, we have tailored suits of the finest workmanship for members of the royal family, from Kedah and Perlis, and served many a foreign customer





Narain is a third-generation business owner, whose shop is now in The Wembley's shopping arcade.

as well as locals," he said. "It was a flourishing business, so it seemed like a natural progression for me to enter the family business."

"I'm not sure if it will continue for a fourth generation; it depends on whether my children want to take over," he added. "Besides, skilled seamstresses are a rarity nowadays."

Although Narain had said them without a hint of sadness, his words weighed on our minds as we started our exploration of the Penang heritage trail on foot; we passed old shoplots,

many still housing age-old trades - from medicine shops to hand-woven rattan furnishings - and we wondered if they were also facing the same inevitable demise.

We returned to the hotel in the evening, and rode the lift up to the Executive Lounge for a drink. As we sipped our cool beverage, we stared out the tall windows at the view of the waters, contemplating the bits of Penang culture and history that we had just experienced.

Night closed in and we returned to our room to get ready for dinner, which would be another street food affair. A 5-minute walk from the hotel brought us to the New Lane Hawker Centre, a place that has been patronised by the locals for decades. Seated on one of the many roadside clunky tables, we stuffed ourselves with almost every type of popular Penang street food.

It was our last night in Penang, so we wanted to have a drink to celebrate the end of a wonderful trip. With our appetites more than satiated, we ambled back to the hotel, took the lift to the highest floor, then rode the escalator up to the D'Shining Roof Top Sky Room, the rooftop wine bar on the 31st floor of The Wembley. Nighttime Georgetown is brightly lit yet surprisingly serene. Ships that have anchored themselves for the night twinkled on the water.

We turned in early that night for our return flight the next morning was an early one. With the request for a wake-up call already made to the Front Desk, we slept deeply and contented, and already looking forward to our next return to the island and The Wembley.



A popular hawker centre just a 5-minute walk from the hotel.



The spectacular night view from the DSRT Sky Room.



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Latest Food Craze: Creating the Perfect Pokebowl

Aaron Lee was already running a cake business, supplying to cafés and restaurants in the Klang Valley, when his friend invited him to Singapore to try apparently what would be the next big food trend to take this part of the world by storm—something called a pokebowl (pronounced *po-kay-bowl*). When Aaron asked his friend to describe this phenomenal dish to him, he was told that it mainly combines sashimi on top of a bowl of rice. Aaron responded with scepticism.

“The idea of cold fish and warm rice was not appealing to the Asian stomach,” Aaron said. Went to Singapore he did, anyway, and was so surprised to find that the combination of well-marinated raw fish, sushi rice and a variety of other ingredients that included greens, condiments and sauces could be as delicious as it was healthy. If you have never had one, imagine a deconstructed sushi, placed inside a bowl.

Aaron immediately set about bringing the dish, which has its origins in Hawaii, to Malaysia. Research began and countless test pokebowls later, many of which were judged by his mother, he opened his first pokebowl café in Sunway, called The Fish Bowl.

Part of his research, which has been ongoing since, includes sourcing for the freshest ingredients available. He shared: “I even visit the salmon supplier’s factory, vegetable farms, and the factories of other ingredient suppliers. I’m that picky to the extent that I hand-pick all my suppliers and I pay close attention to their supplies each and every time—their products have to be *consistent* to meet my expectations. ‘Consistency’ would be the keyword to describe the way I source the ingredients.”

Stepping into the outlet, you would encounter a cafeteria-like layout, not dissimilar to a Subway shop whereby a counter filled with freshly cut ingredients occupy a part of the front of house. However, the amount of ingredients is so vast that it would not do to have customers line up to give their orders. Instead, you grab a piece of printed order sheet, with all the ingredients listed, and a pencil to tick your selection: starting with your choice of base, usually a type of rice or grain; followed by sauces; then an assortment of vegetables; limitless toppings that include nuts, seeds and condiments, and finally the protein of choice, usually raw

salmon or tuna, but The Fish Bowl has expanded its menu to include prawn, chicken, soft shell crab and unagi. You would then pass the order sheet to the cashier, pay and wait as your bowl is assembled and your collection number called.

Essentially, the customer is the curator of his/her own pokebowl, but for the culinarily challenged, how do we put together the perfect bowl? What if we end up composing a veritable disaster of a dish? Not to worry, because Aaron does thorough research and preparation: “The trick is that every single ingredient has to be of a certain size, texture and flavour so that it works with other ingredients in any sort of combination.”

He explained further, “Take almonds and walnuts, for instance; I have determined the best size and the length of time they have to be baked in the oven for the ideal crunch.”

“It gets more complicated with seasonal ingredients, like mangoes and pineapples. I might get a certain species of mango or pineapple one season and a different one the next, and I have to test each of them all over again to make sure that they work with the other ingredients.”

Aaron does have this piece of advice, though: “You need a balance of sweet and salty flavours, a combination of crunchy and soft textures, and a variety of colours in a bowl.” If you are risk-adverse when it comes to your food, then there are pre-set bowls with tried and tested combinations.

Each ingredient goes through a very specific preparation process using very specific kitchen equipment that Aaron had chosen. “For instance, the salad ingredients—such as mix salad, cucumber, tomatoes, corns, edamame, etc—each go through a process of wet and dry cleaning, and then cooking, before being put into a blast chiller to get it to the right temperature in the shortest time, and also for the added function of killing off any bacteria left after cleaning. Then, it is placed in a sealed vacuum packaging and kept at 16 to 18 degrees Celsius.”

The main kitchen equipment used for preparation are the vegetable cutter, combination oven and blast chiller. Using these and his very exact methods, Aaron is able to increase product volume, while maintaining its consistency and also minimising labour cost.

The Fish Bowl claims to offer the “first premium poke” in Malaysia, because the ingredients are, as Aaron explained it, of premium quality and more expensive than what you might get

in other pokebowl cafes, which have begun popping up around Klang Valley since The Fish Bowl first started. At The Fish Bowl, you get pricier ingredients, such as walnuts and avocados, and of greater variety and number too. Yet the price of its pokebowls remain competitive. “We don’t pass on the extra costs to the customers; we simply make a narrower profit margin,” Aaron said.

That said, Aaron discovered that it is not just the quality and combination of ingredients that determine the final outcome, but also the way they are layered and laid out inside the bowl, which affect the taste and aesthetics of the final product.

“We used to scoop the rice on the bottom of the bowl, then layer the vegetables, protein, toppings and sauce, in that order. Customers received a bowl of indiscernible ingredients because they were covered in sauce. The main ingredient, the fish, was hidden, and the rice was dry because the sauce wasn’t getting to the rice,” Aaron recalled. “So, we changed the way we arranged the ingredients: rice first, then sauce, followed by the vegetables, toppings and the fish on top.” The result was a bowl of beautiful colours and textures, that was also well-combined, so that each spoonful was perfect.


After being in operation for a few years, Aaron discovered that male and female customers have different preferences. “The men prefer white rice, the ladies prefer brown rice. Men like nuts and fried garlic chips. Ladies prefer cucumbers and tomatoes, and chia seeds and flax seeds; they seldom choose garlic chips because they don’t want their breath to smell after the meal—men don’t care,” he laughed.

The Fish Bowl has since expanded, now with outlets in 1 Utama and Pavilion KL, and more to come. Meanwhile, Aaron is constantly trying out new ingredients and combinations that would give even the most regular customers something new and exciting to look forward to. “Last Hari Raya, we added kerabu into the mix and it was a success. Just wait,” he teased. “I have a lot more ideas where that came from.”



Aaron Lee

To keep up with The Fish Bowl’s new offerings, follow

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Going farther afield was made even easier with the Mass Rapid Transit (MRT) system that began operations in 2017. Line 1 starts in Sungai Buloh, goes through Kuala Lumpur city and ends all the way in Kajang. Together with the intersecting KTM Komuter line, Sungai Buloh has become a transit point.

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