

GETTING PERSONAL

At Bynd Artisan, customers can put together their own customised paper and leather items with the help of craftsmen

BY MINDY TAN

UCKED away in Jurong, one industrial property in particular attracts more than its share of attention. Apart from the usual lorries and container trucks that ply its entrance on the weekdays, it attracts a fair crowd on the weekends as well. Which is odd, to say the least, given that it is in the middle of Jurong.

The building itself, while non-descript from one angle, reveals an oddly modern black facade on the other. It is the brainchild of Grandluxe's general manager Winnie Chan, who decided to turn what used to be the tuckshop area for Grandluxe's staff into an atelier for her recently launched brainchild, Bynd Artisan.

The newest brand in the Grandluxe portfolio – Grandluxe is still helmed by her father who took over the business from his father – Bynd Artisan is about personalised paper and leather products.

What draws customers back however – no doubt, in addition to the quality products on sale – is the experiential aspect of the Bynd Artisan experience. Like its name suggests, the company's artisans or craftsmen play a significant role in the product and service delivery.

In one corner of the atelier, customers can, with the help of the craftsmen, put together their own customised notebooks. They can choose the type of cover, paper, and binding methods (rivets, eyelets, elastic bands or synthetic leather flaps with snap buttons) for their notebooks – which are offered in a range of colours and textures. The finishing touch – the option to have their name or initials debossed on the cover.

In the other corner, at a large workbench, master craftsman Chong Beng Cheng – who has been part of the Grandluxe family for about 40 years – offers a range of classes which are actively curated. These workshops range from a basic introduction to working with leather to coptic book binding workshops. In the former, participants learn the fundamental techniques of working with leather (cutting, skiving and sewing) to create a personalised set of four items – a coin pouch, card holder, key tab and bracelet.

One of the new classes that is being rolled out involves medieval book binding. For this specific class, the apparatus used was specially designed by Mr Chong himself.

In fact, response to classes has been so overwhelming that Bynd Artisan is looking to open a new atelier in Holland Village's Chip Bee Gardens in August.



PHOTOGRAPHY: CHING, GREENPLASTICSOLDIERS
STYLING: DAN FOO
HAIR & MAKEUP: ERNEST LIM, USING GUERLAIN
WARDROBE: FENDI

“WE WANT STATIONERY TO BE LOOKED AT IN A DIFFERENT LIGHT BECAUSE WE HAVE UPPED THE ANTE AND MADE IT SEXY.”

– Winnie Chan (left), founder of Bynd Artisan

“The new atelier in Holland Village will have a similarly experiential environment, so customers can touch and feel the products or work with our craftsmen to create bespoke items, feel welcome to stay and have some light refreshments at our cafe,” says Ms Chan.

“The focus is not so much on the food but on creating an environment where customers can relax and interact with our craftsmen and enjoy the space. We will be collaborating with local veterans in the F&B industry to offer unique cakes/desserts in unique packaging that guests can bring home as a souvenir.”

The company is also opening another shop-in-shop in Tangs Vivo City in July, which brings the total number of shops-in-shop to two, in both Tangs.

BUILDING THE BRAND

The idea to launch Bynd Artisan came about as Ms Chan started thinking about Grandluxe's future. “With the advancement of technology, schools implementing iPads to replace textbooks, and bookshops closing, I questioned our relevance in today's world,” says Ms Chan.

Grandluxe was started by her grandfather in 1945 in a small shophouse along Mohammed Sultan Road. The main business then was to supply paper stationery to post-war Singapore offices around the area. Seventy years on, the company provides customised gifts for high net

worth individuals, private banking clients and royal families around the world.

On the parent company level, it designs, prints, manufactures and distributes paper and leather lifestyle products to a network of distributors, retailers and Fortune 500 companies in 30 countries.

“Current brands under our portfolio are catered to the mass market and do not have strong brand identities. Our brands were perceived as ‘bookshop’ related so much so that one department store actually suggested we change our name to an Italian one in order to give our products a perceived higher value! It does not help that the printing and book binding industry is generally perceived as a sunset industry,” says Ms Chan.

Taking a leaf out of the book of other successful brands, both Ms Chan and her husband, James Quan, who is also a co-founder of Bynd Artisan, decided that they wanted to adopt a more westernised look and feel for the brand.

“When we finished the branding exercise, we actually had difficulty getting a retail space because it was a time when bookstores were closing. When we approached some of the mall owners, they were like: ‘Paper? Stationery? No, we are a fashion mall.’ So because of our ‘pseudo’ western branding, we thought okay, maybe we should start overseas and when we are successful, we will come back to Singapore.”

The plan, says Ms Chan, was to leverage Grandluxe's existing operations in the United States and the United Kingdom.

So when Mr Quan was exhibiting at a trade fair in New York for Grandluxe, he decided to scout around the SoHo area to look for potential shop space to launch Bynd Artisan. With him was New York-based Singaporean photographer and visual artist, John Clang.

“John Clang brought him to recce the SoHo area, but when he came to understand what we were trying to do, he said, ‘That's totally wrong. Why are you so afraid of your heritage? You shouldn't be afraid of your heritage; you should make full use of your heritage.’ They felt that the whole branding had no soul to it,” says Ms Chan. “At the time, the brand was still Bynd Artisan, but we didn't think of using our craftsmen like Mr Clang.”

Back at the drawing board, the team decided to hark back to its roots. The result is Bynd Artisan as it is today, where the craftsmen are featured front and centre, and heritage corners and walls featuring pictures and objects from the company's past adorn the walls of the atelier.

Says Ms Chan: “As most of the production processes have shifted to our Malaysia factory where cost of manufacturing is lower, there is a lack of challenge for our local craftsman to deliver new products. They have been with us for 30 years on average, and we want to retrain them and find



◀ HANDMADE
Craftsmen help customers to create their own customised notebooks



PHOTOS: YEN MENG JIN



◀ **TOUCH AND FEEL**
Workshop participants can learn the fundamental techniques of working with leather



an area where they can continue to make use of their artisanal skills.”

A SPIRIT OF COLLABORATION

One of the unique selling points of Bynd Artisan is its willingness to collaborate with Singaporean artists and designers. “The local design scene is at a point of growth and with Bynd Artisan, it is about creating another platform for local artists to create something a bit different from what they normally do, allowing them to turn their ideas into reality with small capsule runs,” says Ms Chan.

The first collaboration, with Larry Peh from &Larry, featured various leather goods including a portfolio holder, document holder, T-shirt with a leather pocket, and a wallet. The capsule, which was named Sign of Our Times, was inspired by the “Danger – Keep Out!” sign commonly displayed on the exteriors of construction sites.

For its Q2 display, Bynd Artisan collaborated with sketch artist and educator Erwin Lian to produce The Perfect Sketchbook, a limited edition, artist-grade sketchbook that was successfully funded on kickstarter.com. Backers from more than 40 countries raised approximately US\$53,800 to create this sketchbook. The capsule launch was officiated in January 2015 by Jane Ittogi, who is the community leader of Taman Jurong as well as the chairperson of the Singapore Art Museum. The original drawings are bound in leather cover, and proceeds from the sale were donated to the Taman Jurong Community Welfare Fund.

Says Ms Chan: “In the coming months, we will also be presenting capsule collections by photographer John Clang, who is the first

photographer to have won the President’s Designer of the Year Award, as well as singer-songwriter Gentlebones (Joel Tan). We are in talks with various other local creatives including fashion designers.”

CREATING OPPORTUNITY IN A SUNSET INDUSTRY

While Ms Chan acknowledges that the printing and book binding industry is generally perceived as a sunset industry, the launch of the Bynd Artisan brand is one of the ways that Grandluxe is looking to revive the industry and create a niche for itself.

Not that the parent business has been resting on its laurels. Since joining the company about 21 years ago, Ms Chan has professionalised the business in many ways. These include attaining ISO 9001:2000 Quality Management System certification in 2001; the implementation of SAP ERP System in 2007 which gave the management a true and unified view of the group company’s operations across customer relationship management, procurement, manufacturing and finance; and undertaking of human capital initiatives in 2013 to develop a HR strategy to support future business objectives as well as to develop the company’s next generation of leaders.

“When I first joined the company, the print-making technology was still using a manual cut and paste film with printing plate processing in a dark room. I converted the pre-press and graphic department to a digital and more design-centric department and made use of programs to automate the page-making process for diaries. Such innovations and use of technology are

important to prevent human error on dates and holidays in diaries,” says Ms Chan.

While she is not actively grooming her own children to join the business, Ms Chan is clearly happy that her daughter is taking an interest in the business, especially with the launch of Bynd Artisan. Particularly so, since previously, when she brought designs home to run by her children, they would tell her to sell the business since “nobody uses notebooks any more”.

“The interesting thing was that after we launched this project, my daughter was like ‘wow, this is so cool’. She worked for me in Tangs over the Christmas holidays when we were really busy, and I could see she’s very engaged. And on days she wasn’t helping us, she would call her friends to check on sales. She told me she enjoyed telling people about the brand even if she didn’t make the sale, so I’m very thankful for that. Maybe they see a future in the company’s long term with this brand.”

Looking ahead, the plan is to grow the Bynd Artisan brand through franchising. “We have received enquiries from many countries to franchise the brand overseas and have embarked on a franchise project that we plan to complete by the third quarter of this year. Some of the target markets for franchising include Australia, China, Dubai, Indonesia, the Philippines and Thailand,” says Ms Chan.

“So it’s different from our previous business where we grew by selling products. We want to sell the concept, and in terms of franchising, if let’s say I franchise the concept to Indonesia, their designer capsule will (be conceived) working with Indonesian designers.”

She concludes: “We want stationery to be looked at in a different light because we have upped the ante and made it sexy. Stationery should not be seen as boring but an elegant and personal accessory to complement the user.” ■



PHOTOS: YEN MENG JIN