

Singapore food brands stay ahead in rat race

EGG TARTS in cookie form, anyone?

What about *kueh* that lasts more than half a day – with a shelf life of a week, or even a year? Turning to both technology and recipe tweaks, food manufacturers here have been cooking up new products to stay fresh.

And these moves don't just allow food manufacturers to diversify and grow overseas, Bernice Tay, director of Enterprise Singapore's (ESG) food manufacturing division, told *The Business Times*. "On a deeper cultural level, thanks to the innovative efforts of our food companies, we can continue to enjoy heritage flavours with a modern twist."

That's amid the ongoing FoodInnovate initiative – led by ESG, but also featuring public agencies such as the Economic Development Board, Agency for Science, Technology and Research and Singapore Food Agency –

which aims to make Singapore a food and nutrition hub.

The scheme, launched in April 2018, can fit companies out with "resources, tools and knowledge-building platforms" to drive innovation and promote tech adoption, Ms Tay noted.

"In the last two years, we have supported nearly 220 food companies in adopting advanced technologies... as well as develop and commercialise new-to-market products," she added. For instance, technologies such as high-pressure processing (HPP) and microwave-assisted thermal sterilisation can extend product shelf life while keeping the food quality intact.

This festive period, we look at how innovation is used to enhance some traditional goodies. **BY CLAUDIA CHONG AND ANNABETH LEOW**



LIM KEE FOOD MANUFACTURING

Local supermarkets have stocked Lim Kee's wholemeal yam *pau*, or steamed buns, for four years now, with the manufacturer adding a whole-grain blend of wheat and purple corn flour to the mix. Meanwhile, Lim Kee has also been testing a diabetes-friendly plant fibre blend from local startup Alchemy Foodtech since mid-2018, and is working with partners such as meat-alternative brands Quorn and Sophie's Kitchen to develop an as-yet uncommercialised range of plant-based products.

Lim Kee's product strategy is based on using food technology innovations, as well as higher-quality ingredients and new flavours, said Ang Khim Wee, head of business development. The company has invested a five-figure sum in its next-generation *paus*, and budgets between 5 per cent and 8 per cent of annual revenue for innovation projects, he told BT.



HOME'S FAVOURITE

Durian snowskin mooncakes by Home's Favourite were able to reach the shores of China, Hong Kong, Macau and the US after the company spent a year tackling the issue of high bacteria growth. Methods such as heat treatment are typically used to reduce the bacteria in durian, but this affects the texture and taste of the fruit.

Home's Favourite invested S\$900,000 in high-pressure processing (HPP) technology. With that, bacteria could be killed using a cold-water high-pressure process with no compromise on texture and taste, said managing director Jason Lee. The HPP machine is able to process about 120kg to 150kg of durian hourly. The durian products now draw in about S\$3 million in revenue each year.



LEMAQ

Lemaq has added a modern twist to *kueh jong kong* – a traditional Malay and Peranakan cake wrapped in banana leaves – by serving it in a cup with three layers comprising coconut sugar, pandan juice extract and coconut cream. But the *kueh* takes a long time to prepare, yet would not last more than three to four hours if not refrigerated. When Nerita Yolanda started her stall in 2018, she had to throw away most of the *kueh jong kong* after it went bad.

Working with the Food Innovation and Resource Centre (FIRC) over four to five months, Lemaq managed to extend the dessert's shelf life from five days to seven days in the chiller. Adjustments were made to the ingredients and their proportion. Now, wastage has been significantly reduced, and average production has doubled to 10,000 cups a month.



LEK LIM NONYA CAKE

A popular Teochew snack with a long history, the dumpling-like *soon kueh* typically has to be eaten within a day to get the full burst of flavour and freshness. But Lek Lim Nonya Cake found that this limited its ability to supply the food to customers.

After a year's research, the company managed to create frozen *soon kueh* with a shelf life of two years, all thanks to blast-freezing technology. It is currently producing close to a million non-frozen *soon kueh* a year. Lek Lim Nonya Cake forecasts that with potential extra demand for the frozen products, central kitchen utilisation rate could increase by at least 20 per cent, said owner Gavan Sing.



TONG HENG

Tong Heng's newly launched egg cookies are made from the same ingredients that go into the brand's signature diamond-shaped egg tarts. It uses no preservatives, which originally meant a shelf life of not more than two weeks. But Tong Heng has unlocked the secret to keeping the cookies for up to a year.

The product is packed in a pastry sleeve much like a bag of potato chips: The sleeve is made of three layers, with the centre layer being aluminium foil that blocks out light. The pack is flushed with nitrogen before it is sealed. Tong Heng spent S\$2,500 on the technology, said general manager Ana Fong.