



Above: A mural on one of the walls of the Tavern in the Park

Right: Diners enjoying the ambience as much as the food and drinks at the Tavern in the Park

Step in for more than a cuppa

The traditional coffee house has morphed into hipster cafes and bars offering everything from designer coffees and pairing art with wine as F&B owners introduce new concepts to keep customers coming

THE humble coffee, a favourite drink at breakfast or tea time, has come a long way. The traditional *kopi-O* came up against its first competitors when designer coffees such as espresso, macchiato and latte began flowing into our coffee cups in the 1980s and 1990s.

Connoisseurs, especially the young, developed a taste for new brews. The humble *kopitiam* was no longer the place to stop for that cuppa. Instead coffee drinkers began patronising coffee houses, ranging from small owner-operated outfits to global chains such as Starbucks, CaffeeBene and Dunkin' Donuts for their beverage of choice.

Unlike the traditional coffee shops with their tiled walls and tables of old men eating half-boiled eggs and steamed bread with kaya, these air-conditioned outlets serve as places to catch up with friends or meet clients over a cup of coffee. Coffee drinking is now a social ritual.

Lately, another change has infiltrated the coffee-drinking culture. A cup of the aromatic brew in a pleasant surrounding is no longer enough for the coffee lover.

Concept cafes have entered the scene. Just as important as serving the right brew, these outlets also offer the "right atmosphere", catering to different segments of society. Interiors are styled to suite customers' preferences - from the stylish to the bizarre. In some of these cafes, food is as important as the drink.

Satiating the thirst

The coffee culture has caught on among the young, especially those from the urban middle class and upper middle class segment.

As a result, there is a heightened demand for premium quality coffee. Instead of relying solely on imported roasted coffee beans, many cafes now opt to get their supplies from independent distributors. Otherwise, they purchase raw beans that they later roast themselves.

Besides serving coffee, many cafes have improvised the traditional coffee house menu by adding items such as light snacks, pastries and, in many cases, even main courses.

According to market research firm Euromonitor International, the cafe business is likely to see "immense development aligned with the strong purchasing power among young adults from the middle to higher income group".



by TANG CHING YEE

Below: Hello Kitty Cafe in Sunway is one of the numerous cartoon-character based concept cafes to open



This generation is generally less cost-conscious and have more sophisticated tastes than their parents. In addition, many have surpluses in their allowance to enable them to indulge in a luxury lifestyle.

Dining experiences is key

Cafes are great places to kill time, especially during the weekends. They are also favourite venues for friends and family to get together. It is fair to say that we are beginning to opt for cafes over the conventional hawker stalls that have given the country its "food paradise" label.

Adrian Cheah, the owner of Tavern in the Park in George Town, Penang, believes that customer experience is crucial in attracting more people. "Today, dining is no longer just about satisfying one's appetite. Cafe-goers now seek places that are not only aesthetically pleasing but also a pleasant or distinctive experience," he says.

"To make it in the food and services industry, it is no longer enough to just serve good food," he adds.

Social media also has an impact on customers' choice of places to have their coffee. Customers regularly document their dining experience on their Facebook or Instagram sites. Positive remarks can help the cafe build a great reputation, adding prominence and value to its brand. On the other hand, negative remarks can break the business.

The criteria that contribute to a customer's perception include consistency of service, ambience and entertainment value. "There should be

a balance in all these aspects," Cheah says.

Most importantly, a cafe needs to have a compelling concept in order to stand out, to differentiate itself from the competition.

We have been witness to a wide range of new concepts adopted by cafes over the years, some of them quite unexpected and bizarre.

The popular ones revolve around concepts that are family friendly, such as the Charlie Brown Cafe in Kuala Lumpur, Lat's Place in Johor (since closed) and D'Dream (for Doraemon) Cafe in Selangor, all of which have cartoons as the central theme.

There are some that are more offbeat, such as the Clinic Cafe and Pkknik Cafe (with a hipster theme), both of which are in Penang.

A few years ago, Japan's Tenshi No Cafe opened its first outlet in Malaysia. Located in Petaling Jaya, the cafe features waitresses dressed in French domestic maids outfits. They act as servants to the customers. Customers are treated as if they have just returned home and have the maids at their beck and call. The customers are addressed as "master" or "mistress" and they can pay extra to be spoon-fed by the waitresses.

Picking a theme

Concepts such as these, though controversial, are the attractions that customers are drawn to. Deciding on a concept for a cafe is an important task that takes intensive research; it is something that business owners must put effort in.

"What value do you add to the market, that's the question I ask my clients at the start," says Cheah, who also acts as consultant to entrepreneurs planning to start a food and beverage business.

"The business can be profitable only if it is well planned," he adds.

When Cheah decided to locate his cafe in a park in the heart of George Town in Penang, his intention was to give visitors a pleasant surprise on discovering a coffee house as they wander around the city.

The cafe, which is attached to the Hin Bus Depot Art Gallery, sports Western-oriented designs, a contrast to the area surrounding the park. Cheah's intention was to also give customers the

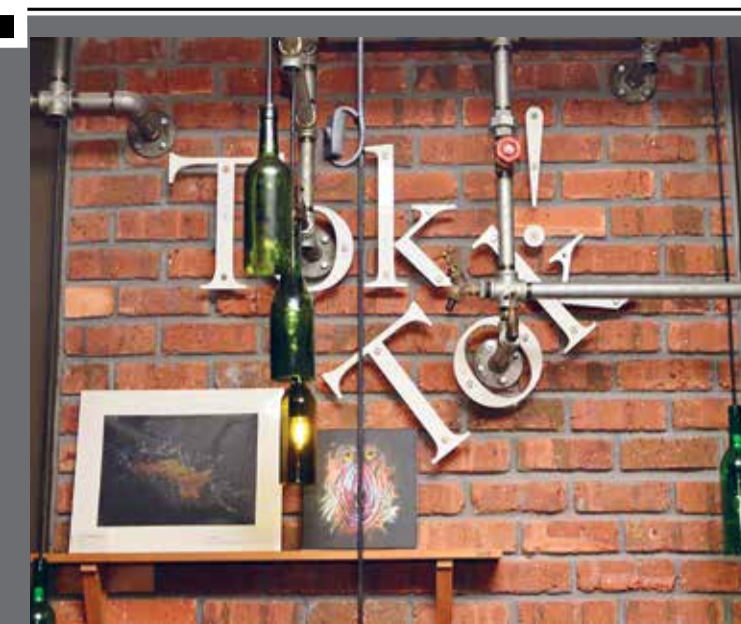
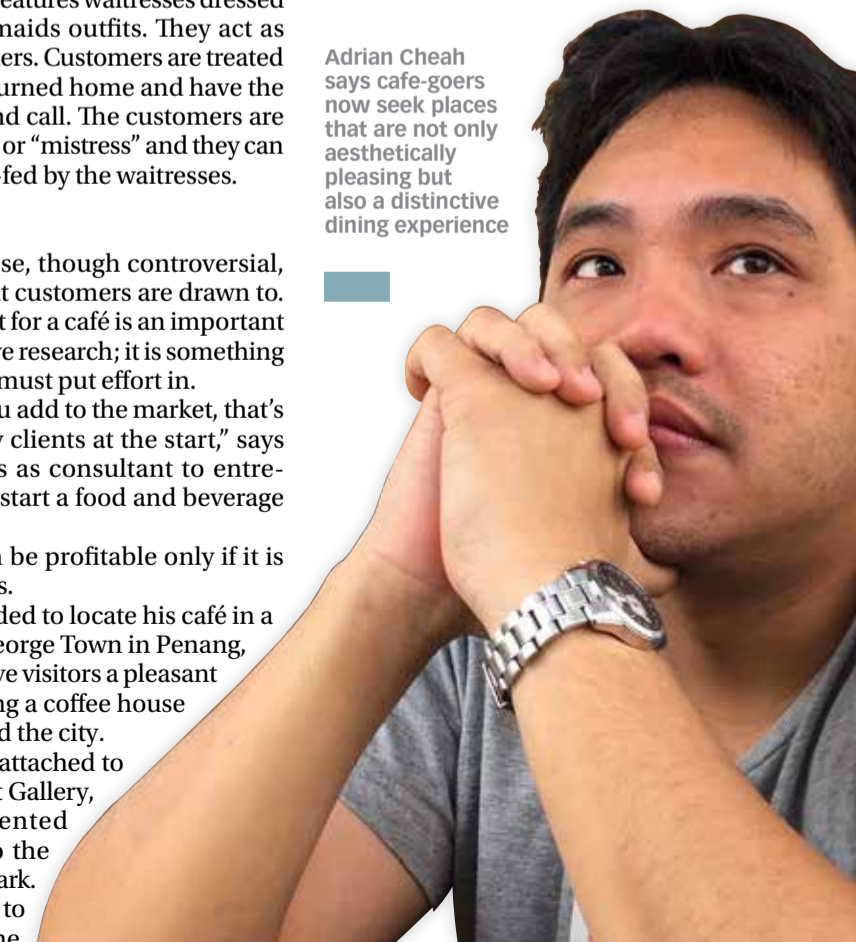
experience of taking part in a treasure hunt.

Cheah conceptualised his idea for Tavern in the Park when he found that there is a market for "casual dining". "We didn't want to go into cheap eats because there already are many hawker stalls in Penang. Fine dining wasn't a good option either because most people do not want pricey food. Finally, we decided to create a casual dining place for people to relax and hang out," he adds.

On the menu are mostly Western cuisine. "The chef uses basic but good ingredients to create complex flavours," Cheah says. "We even have an herb garden from where we get herbs for cooking."

For coffee house owners or operators like Cheah, when the customer savours more than just his cup of espresso or macchiato, they know that they have hit on the right concept.

Adrian Cheah says cafe-goers now seek places that are not only aesthetically pleasing but also a distinctive dining experience



Above: The interior décor of Talk Talk Wine Bar



Left: For beer lovers, the bar also serves a selection of brews

Where art and booze meet

IN the art capitals of the world, such as Paris and New York, wine is served when artists showcase their masterpieces. In some ways, wine and art go hand in hand.

For Gerald Chin, this is a good enough reason to set up a wine bar where local artists can also display their works.

Chin, the owner of Talk Talk Wine Bar in Penang, is a bit of an amateur artist himself. In fact, he describes himself as a "cultivated" artist. Even if he is not born to be an artist, he feels he has been groomed to be one.

He developed a passion for the arts while he was working on his thesis at university. The subject matter? Experimental Art.

Chin now devotes his time to promote local art. This is part of his three-year strategy to brand the Talk Talk Wine Bar and turn it into a hotel to be named White Canvas Crib. The wine bar is located in a modest shoplot in Pekaka Square in Sungai Ara, away from the city centre. It is a gamble but Chin is confident that it will pay off.

The wine bar has hosted *The White Canvas* - a private initiative to promote local music and art in Penang - in the past two years. There will be a mini festival every three months to feature works by the musicians and artists. Chin's objective is to provide a platform for local musicians and artists to showcase their otherwise undiscovered talent.

The first mini festival was held in October last year. It featured an arts and music celebration that attracted the participation of artists from Penang and Kuala Lumpur. There were more than 200 guests.

The success of the event has prompted Chin to organise a sequel. Called *The White Canvas: Chapter 2*, it will be launched this month. This will feature 30 artists who will be invited to present their works and exchange them for those from other artists.

It works out for Chin. By promoting the local arts, he is offering his customers a more enriching dining experience as well as a

glimpse of local artworks.

Uncovering local art and music

Talk Talk Wine Bar has a rustic and homey ambience. The smell of pine wood and the dim incandescent light give patrons a lingering cosiness. The staff welcome customers with great enthusiasm, giving even the first-timers the impression of familiarity.

Scribbles on brick walls, copper-brown water pipes and classic windows salvaged from old houses are the finishing touches to give the bar an unpretentious impression.

Another addition to the features of the bar is the live bands that never fail to liven up the atmosphere. The live band sessions, held on Monday, Wednesday, Friday and Saturday nights, are perfect for those who seek to escape their tedious daily routines. The band usually starts off with jazz and later extends the repertoire to all genres of music.

Chin emphasises on originality when it comes to selecting the bands during audition. All the performers are locals and are encouraged to present hits of their own creation - even if it means the crowd is not fond of originals.

"The crowd might not know what they want; to let them pick their music is to narrow their scope. So we tell our guests to come here and enjoy the distinct and unique numbers written and composed by our local talents," says Chin.

Nonetheless, all the bands acquire the freedom to showcase their music under one important rule that Chin stresses on - they must never forget to have fun. "Living in the moment" has never been portrayed more accurately seeing those bands rejuvenating the crowd for the night.

Bridging local artists with corporate sectors

It was through Chin's first engagement with the bands when he realised the problems that local artists were facing. The arts are neglected because it is not deemed cost-effective to the country.

"The introverted traits in artists may have taken a toll on their communications skills. Often enough, artists fail to make people perceive the meaning behind their work due to the lack of mutual understanding," Chin says.

"There is a barrier between artists and the corporate sector. Businesses do not see value in the artists' creation, resulting the artists working on a *syiok sendiri* basis," explains Chin.

With this, artists were advised to be aligned with the market demands instead of being self-centred in order for arts to be widely appreciated.

Chin proclaims himself as a mediator between local artists and the business sector, providing them a platform to unleash their innovation and creativity. This way, artists do not have to depend on a middle person to promote their art which often ends up with the prices marked up. By incorporating the element of art in his bar, this not only gives the public exposure to local arts, it also gives an identity to the bar.

Chin concludes that the key to establish a successful outlet is to merge business and culture, in a way that he believes he has the job done well.

In a way, Talk Talk Wine Bar is more than a place for entertainment. It can be a source of inspiration for many.



Above: Gerald Chin, owner of Talk Talk Wine Bar

Below: A local band performing at the bar, which offers opportunities to otherwise unknown local musicians to showcase their talent