

## Old trades, new trends



### 1. Brillyn Toh

Managing partner at Hock Siong & Co

In an age where most people live in a throwaway society, and anything bright, new and shiny is preferred, it is hard to believe anyone would want to spend money on second-hand goods. But step into second-hand furniture retailer Hock Siong & Co and you see people selecting pieces of solid wood furniture or an old table lamp.

Owner Toh Chin Siong started the company as a karung guni (rag and bone) business during the 1970s. But since 1999, he has been buying items from hotels and reselling them. He still runs the business but it is his eldest daughter, Brillyn, who has modernised it.

"We may be in a sunset industry, but with technology, Hock Siong can catch up with the times," says Ms Toh, 30.

She studied business IT in polytechnic and later did a business degree at the National University of Singapore, with the clear intention of joining the family business and taking it into the future. Her childhood was spent going around with her father collecting old newspapers, and she also helped her dad with the business during her university days, since he wasn't too proficient in English.

"It was natural to want to join the family business," she says. She has been working full-time at Hock Siong for the last seven years.

Back then, she was surprised to see that invoices were written in carbon copy bill books. "We had so much paper, which was ironic since we were a company that is into recycling," she says. Using such bill books also meant there were no real checks in place - any staff could easily make changes in the invoices.

So she decided to introduce a point of sale or POS system. She met with some reluctance - not from her father, but rather from the staff. "They didn't see anything wrong with the old system, and were not keen on the change," she says.

Still she persisted, and today, Hock Siong uses a cloud POS system that allows Ms Toh to track sales, orders, and customers' purchases, even when she is overseas. "It is a worthwhile investment, since operations are run more efficiently now," she says.

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Ms Toh recalls that when she first joined the company full-time, the business wasn't doing that well. It was also around then that Facebook was starting to catch on in Singapore. "Since it was free to start a Facebook page, I did one for Hock Siong," she says. Today, the page has garnered 41,000 likes. Two years ago, after noticing that not everyone likes going on Facebook, she started an Instagram account as well. Some 2000 posts later, the account has 15,900 followers and counting.

Ms Toh takes pictures on her iPhone and comes up with the captions. Her style is to have a caption that is irrelevant to the picture. It can be random things such as captioning a newly refurbished teal tv console as her bae, says Ms Toh. "I don't want the captions to be too serious. My posts are more to capture the mood of the moment," she explains. But should anyone want to know the prices of the items, she welcomes them to message her directly. "I reply to all comments and questions, since it makes for better interaction."

Every Saturday morning, Ms Toh hosts a Facebook Live session, which she nicknames Walkie Hockie, where she takes her audiences on a tour of the showroom. Each session gets about 800 to 1,000 views.

Going on social media has helped spread the word. Ms Toh usually posts new items that have just arrived at the store. She posts about five to eight times a week, and whenever a post goes up, it usually draws a bigger crowd to the store that same day. Hock Siong is also attracting a younger clientele.

Ms Toh has a personal Instagram account which is private, where she usually posts food pictures. While her father initially wasn't convinced by the power of social media, he now has his own Facebook account too, and checks on the company page.

Ms Toh hopes to make online shopping a reality in the near future. She plans to set up a pop-up online shop, so customers can make their purchases easily.

While she knows that social media has drawn more awareness to Hock Siong, she isn't too caught up with numbers and analytics. For Ms Toh, keeping alive Hock Siong's mission of building an environmentally conscious enterprise that provides clients with quality products at affordable prices is more important. "Technology is just a tool, there has to be a balance between that and our company's mission," she says.

[hocksiong.com.sg](http://hocksiong.com.sg)

## **2. Jeffrey Tan & Angeline Ong**

Founders of Dish the Fish

Buying fish at the wet market may offer a better guarantee of freshness than a supermarket, but it can also be a damp and smelly affair. Not to mention that you're fighting with aunties and domestic helpers for the best catch, and you also need to cultivate a relationship with the stall holder so that you're not overcharged.

It's a business that Jeffrey Tan is all too familiar with. His late father was a fish wholesaler, his elder brother is a fishmonger, and Mr Tan spent his formative years running around Jurong Fishery Port.

Even though he wasn't in the fish business then, he often wondered why things couldn't be done differently. "Fishmongering is a sunset trade, but I saw that there were a lot of changes that could be made," says Mr Tan, 33.

A few years ago, he gave up a cushy job in business IT and started Dish the Fish, a new age fishmongering business. Together with his wife Angeline Ong, he runs two outlets - a stall at Beo Crescent Market, and another shop at West Coast Plaza.

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Unlike traditional stalls, where the fish is displayed on ice and customers are free to poke and touch them, Dish the Fish displays selections of red grouper, long-head grunt, sea bass, red snapper, prawns and oysters behind glass panels. At the West Coast Plaza outlet, there is a cutting chart that hangs above the fish, so customers can request how they want their fish to be cut. Besides whole fish, Dish the Fish also sells vacuum packed salmon and snapper fillets.

Staff don caps and smart dark green uniforms. They are encouraged to banter with customers so as to better understand preferences and to get feedback. The couple also make it a point to let their staff taste the more exotic fish that they sell, such as monkfish. "When they have tasted the fish, they would be able to make better recommendations," says Ms Ong, 30, a former accountant.

The couple have also invested in technology for their operations. For example, the company uses a digital system to track both retail and online sales, customers' information and preferences, and also labelling of produce. "It all helps make operations run more efficiently," says Mr Tan.

While business is now looking up, Mr Tan says it wasn't all rosy when he first started in 2015. Back then, he sold frozen seafood at the wet market stall, which was a wrong move. He had no sales for three months, and finally decided to try selling some chilled fish instead, which had more success. "Customers who come to the market early in the morning want fresh fish, and are not looking for frozen seafood," he says. He still spends mornings at the wet market, and is known for charming the aunties there in fluent Teochew, Hokkien, Cantonese and Malay while cleaning their fish in double-quick time.

Encouraged by the positive response, the couple decided to open a second outlet, this time in a mall, in November 2017. "Being in a mall means we are more accessible to customers," says Ms Ong. They could also stay open longer and cater to the working crowd.

The bigger space also meant that the store could have a cooked food area. "Often, people have a dish in mind before buying the fish, and this way, they could taste the fish before buying," says Ms Ong.

The menu is small, ranging from red snapper steak or whole snapper steamed Teochew style, salmon sashimi, and fish head steamed with fermented beans. Customers also have the option of picking any fish from the retail side, and have it cooked for them as well.

Dish the Fish also sells the accompanying ingredients and condiments, so that customers can easily recreate the dish. "We want customers to eat more fish, regardless of whether they cook it at home or have it in the shop," says Ms Ong.

Besides the two outlets, Dish the Fish also offers online shopping. The fish can either be self-collected or delivered. "Our regular walk-in customers are starting to buy online," says Ms Ong. She credits this move to gaining the trust of customers. "Once they trust the quality of our fish, they naturally stick with us," she says.

While the couple get most of their supply from Jurong Fishery Port, they are looking to getting the fish straight from suppliers. They also plan to expand into the wholesale space, but "with an experiential shopping experience", says Mr Tan.

[dishthefish.com.sg](http://dishthefish.com.sg)

**Jacob Tan & Juliana**

Co-founders of Tiong Hoe Specialty Coffee

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Coffee aficionados know that when they want a good cup of specialty brew, they head to Block 170 on Stirling Road where, on the ground floor, is a nondescript shop called Tiong Hoe Specialty Coffee.

A signboard on the wall states the history of the company, dating from the 1960s to present day. It tells the story of a Mr Tan who, at 17, started work as an apprentice in a Dutch company called Mirandolle Voute & Co.

The Mr Tan in question is Tan Tiong Hoe, who later started his own coffee roasting company in the 1970s. Today, he has retired, and his son, Jacob, has taken over the business with his partner, Juliana, who goes by one name.

Back in the 1970s, due to the huge increase in raw coffee prices, there was a trend of mixing coffee with maize, margarine and sugar among local coffee masters. But the elder Mr Tan stuck to his way of roasting 100 per cent pure coffee to maintain his standard of quality coffee.

The younger Mr Tan, 37, took over the family business when his father wanted to retire. Together with Juliana, 28, he started Tiong Hoe Specialty Coffee in 2014.

The duo are both licensed Q Graders by the Coffee Quality Institute, meaning they are qualified to grade coffee. Specialty coffee can only be considered so if it meets a certain grade on a scoring system.

Mr Jacob Tan says that when Tiong Hoe Specialty Coffee was started, third wave coffee had arrived in Singapore. But he explains that Tiong Hoe's offerings are different. For example, their beans are sourced directly from coffee farms. And while they do procure from traditional coffee producing countries such as Ethiopia, Panama and Guatemala, they also actively promote beans from Asia, including India, Indonesia, and more unusual places such as Myanmar and Papua New Guinea.

The roasting is done on site, with a Probat Roaster from Germany, which the elder Mr Tan used, and newer machinery such as the Roaster and Roaster from Turkey. Tiong Hoe roasts about two tonnes of coffee each month.

With each batch of coffee roasted, the team not only taste the coffee themselves, but also get customers to try it out to get feedback. When necessary, roasting times are tweaked to get the perfect flavour.

Even the taste of the water matters. Ms Juliana explains that as tap water in Singapore has too much chlorine, they filter the water first, before adding their own concoction of minerals to it. "It makes for a better brew," she explains.

Mr Jacob Tan debunks the myth that sugar needs to be added to coffee. "Some coffee beans are naturally sweet and have a floral note," he says.

When the store first opened, it was set up as a coffee bar, with standing room and a retail space. Over the years, seating space has been added, along with a small bites menu. "Customers requested these details, and we decided to put them in," says Mr Jacob Tan. The interiors have also been done up to be more Instagram-friendly.

Besides selling coffee, Tiong Hoe also offers coffee appreciation, latte art and barista courses.

The crowd at Tiong Hoe is a mixed one, with younger people who are familiar with specialty coffee and the aunties and uncles who have been drinking kopitiam coffee most of their lives. The elder Mr Tan has also been receptive to specialty coffee.

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"We have converted non-coffee drinkers. Our goal is to get people to rethink coffee," says Mr Jacob Tan.

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