

Publication: Vulcan Post Online

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Headline: 2 S'porean Self-Taught Carpenters Started Up, And Their Furniture Company Broke Even In A Year

## 2 S'porean Self-Taught Carpenters Started Up, And Their Furniture Company Broke Even In A Year



School is the best time to incubate ideas and dream about turning those ideas into reality.

But most people after graduating from university would find work in a field related to their studies.

These guys, however, decided to go ahead with their passion and started up a furniture company of their own.

### Embarking On A Different Journey



Founders of Herman Furniture / Image Credit: Herman Furniture

Herman Furniture was started in 2012 by two 30-year-olds, Brandon Heng and Gay Zheng Cai, along with two other partners.

Brandon and Zheng Cai were secondary school friends and later, Singapore Management University (SMU) graduates who majored in IT and business respectively.

Initially, they thought of opening a “bespoke carpentry outfit”, so right after graduation, they rented a factory space at Pioneer Centre, Brandon told me.

“It was a haphazard process, experimenting with carpentry through online tutorials and learning from anyone who’s willing to share their knowledge,” he continued.

By “online tutorials”, he meant YouTube and Google, according to this 2016 Business Times (BT) interview.

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A Live Edge table by Herman Furniture / Image Credit: Herman Furniture

“And it was through this process that we made friends in the area who introduced us to Suar wood and Live Edge tables. Hooked on the beauty and sustainability of Live Edge tables, we knew Herman Furniture had to happen.”

Zheng Cai told BT that they wanted to incorporate technology with woodworking through a platform that lets customers design their own furniture and they would produce it.

He added, “But we realised that we didn’t have the technology to develop the necessary software, and most people wouldn’t know how to design a piece of furniture.”

So they decided to postpone that idea and find other ways to earn money.

Going Against The Grain



Image Credit: Herman Furniture

Over the years, Herman Furniture has established itself as a “[seller] of premium, affordable and sustainable Live Edge tables”, Brandon described.

Live Edge is a type of style typically seen in carpentry, that fuses the natural edge of wood into the design of the furniture.

The unique brand name was named after one of the founders’ father.

“He inspired the idea of importing raw wood slabs for furniture so that people can have a beauty of nature in their living spaces. So it seemed only natural to ‘credit’ him,” Brandon said.

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Their families were supportive of them going on this unconventional venture and their friends were intrigued when they first started.

“Back in 2012, the concept of using wood slabs for tables hasn't really been heard of,” Brandon recalled.

But some old-timers thought they were barking up the wrong tree.



Image Credit: Herman Furniture

“They think carpentry is a dying trade

and we are better off doing something else in Singapore.”

He admitted that they made a point but decided to take their chances and “ran with it anyway”.

In the BT interview, Zheng Cai reckoned that these industry veterans were worried for them, but said optimistically that with young people like them joining the industry, “it can be revived”.

They chose to work with Suar wood because each piece of wood is unique, Brandon said.

Commercial solid wood tables sold in the market are jointed by pieces of wood, while Suar wood lets them make a table using a single slab of wood.

Suar is also a highly sustainable wood from Indonesia harvested from rain trees that grow quickly because of the climate and environment.

“Our carpentry arm works with different types of wood to make furniture such as Nyatoh, Teak, Balau, Mahogany and Kapur just to name a few,” he shared.

Trials And Tree-bulations

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Since starting up, they have amassed and maintained a loyal and strong customer base especially amongst wood enthusiasts because customers appreciate that they control every aspect of the process.

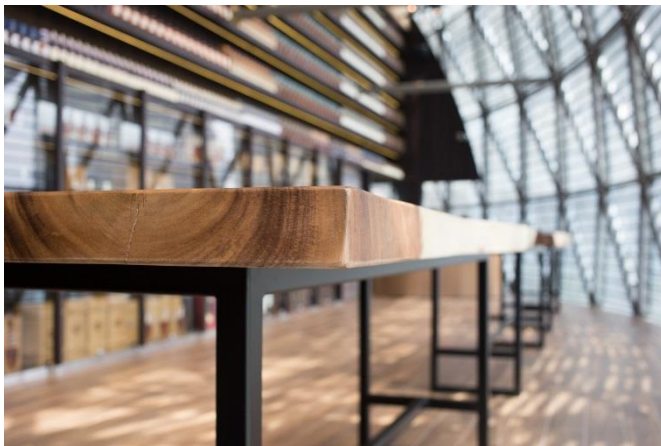
Making a Herman Furniture piece starts with the customer picking a slab of wood from their curated collection of imported wood the team procure themselves.

Before the wood ends up in the workshop, they are put in batches and kiln-dried and air-dried for a few years.

“When they arrive in our workshop, master carpenters use a tedious process to finish the wood with up to seven layers of lacquer. Each layer needs to be sanded, coated, prepared and dried taking at the very least two weeks to complete,” Brandon explained.

“[This] ensures that every table that leaves our workshop has the same smooth satisfying finish to it and is water, heat and stain-resistant.”

But in business, nothing is ever smooth and varnished.



Brandon said, “Competition has been building up over the years as it has become easier to import ready-made furniture from overseas to sell them locally.”

He told me they have “lost track” of the time spent on going on trips to source for wood, prototyping products, and experimenting with different woodworking processes.

But staying in touch with their clients and getting feedback from them has let them continually improve their product.

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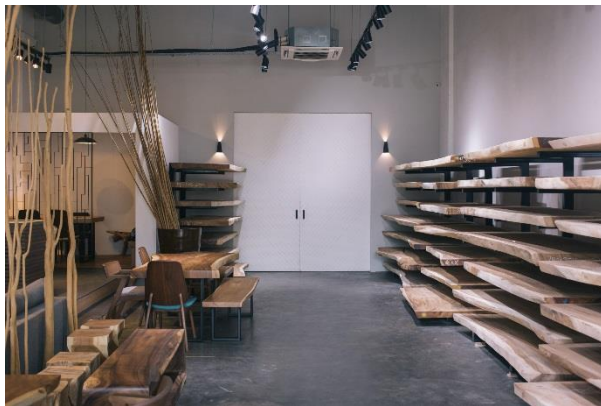
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This gives them an edge over competitors because it instills confidence in their customers.

They offer a one-year warranty and a one-time reparation service, as no one can predict wood movement for sure, especially on a single slab of solid wood.

They also promise to bring the entire slab of wood back to the workshop to sand and refinish at no cost if it's unsatisfactory.

Brandon when they managed to pick up some trade secrets from industry professionals, it was good luck.



“We were on a sourcing trip in Indonesia where we first met Paman (Uncle in Bahasa) Tito. He overheard our conversation with a dealer and actually approached us to tell us we were being ripped off,” he recounted.

“It turns out he has retired from the industry but was a carpenter that worked on many renowned projects. We continued talking and learned that we both shared a passion for Suar wood and Live Edge tables!”

“He has since helped us make the right connections and showed us how to navigate the carpentry industry. We are still incredibly thankful for his timely advice and hope he’s enjoying his retirement,” he quipped.

Their tables can be found in offices such as Google, LinkedIn, PayPal, Credit Suisse, and SMU, and in cafés and bars.

They have also sold to customers in Norway, France, and USA.

Logging In Their Growth

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Brandon revealed their investment in the business was in the high five-figures, fully funding their venture with their own savings and money borrowed from their parents.

“Through a very hands-on approach to the business, we managed to break even within the first year. We were involved with every part of the process, from handpicking the wood slabs and selling them to delivery and after sales services!”

He shared, “We started with a small team of four founders, and have now grown to a business with its own business development, sales, production and even delivery teams.”

“It’s also heartening to see that we’ve gone from just 100 pieces of wood slabs in stock to an average of 300 to 400 slabs these days.”

They have since “branched out”, according to BT, to create The Merry Men Works and The Merry Men Interiors – which are now the “bespoke carpentry outfit” Brandon mentioned earlier.

Brandon explained that these companies started around the same time as Herman Furniture and were founded by the same four people.



“It was sort of a natural progression as each company complemented each other.”

“In total, we run these businesses with about 20 workers including ourselves. We all do everything from business development, finances, logistics, client servicing to project management and execution,” he said.

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“Now, five years in, we’ve grown from strength to strength, with three companies and more than 500 customised Live Edge tables served.”

Right now, they are looking for a good and reliable logistics partner to bring the business global and to keep up with the overwhelming number of overseas enquiries.

They are in the midst of putting together their own in-house steel fabrication team which would give them full control of the production of table legs, “allowing for really unique customisation and exciting designs”, Brandon said.

His advice to aspiring entrepreneurs: “Start young! Your youth is your greatest asset. If you ever thought of starting a business of your own, do not wait until you have worked for a few years before doing it. Chances are that you’ll never do it.”

Check out Herman Furniture’s website [here](#).