



FOOD & CREATIVITY

Playing with Peranakan food

A team of students redesigned traditional kueh to celebrate the Peranakan community's culture. JUSTIN ZHUANG reports.



[Photo: Division of Industrial Design, NUS]

Wrapped in colourful floral motifs and shaped like a jar, it looks just like the traditional kamcheng. The kamcheng is used in Peranakan Chinese wedding ceremonies to contain food for the bride and groom. It is not porcelain ware, however, but a kueh that you can eat!

This “Porcelain Kueh” (main photo) was created by design students Kwa Li Ying and Chantel Loh for their class project. Their aim was to reimagine traditional pastries prepared by Peranakans, who are of mixed Chinese and Malay heritage.



This Xiang Kueh has messages inside to surprise consumers as they eat it layer by layer.

Inspired by the beauty of this iconic Peranakan container covered in auspicious symbols, the duo set out to create an edible version. They found many **parallels** with the ang ku kueh, which is also eaten by Peranakans as a form of blessing. The kueh made of glutinous rice flour has a skin covered with intricate patterns like the highly decorated kamcheng does.

“We felt the significance of the kamcheng resonated with the ang ku kueh. Both were for holding something sweet and eaten during festive occasions,” says Ms Kwa.

She and Ms Loh redesigned the kueh that typically comes in a red tortoise shell shape (hence its name in Hokkien) into a kamcheng using various tools they designed. These included moulds for casting the dough into the jar-like shape and stamps for printing the traditional floral motifs. The final touch was filling in the patterns with edible paints by hand to recreate the look of the kamcheng.

Moulding new designers

Their kueh was one of seven creations by teams of students at **NUS**'s Division of Industrial Design. Other examples included kueh in the form of geometric Peranakan tiles and another resembling the colourful patterns found in Peranakan beading.

The class was introduced by Hans Tan to help his students learn the connections between food and **industrial design**. For instance, both rely on moulds to create shapes.

“Moulding is one of the biggest inventions of the Industrial Revolution as it allowed for the mass production of goods. But moulds have existed way before that in the culinary world too,” Prof Tan says.

Be it for making kuehs or iPhones, moulds help to reproduce a design quickly and precisely. Beyond shaping how a thing looks, they also affect the taste of kueh. The designers of Porcelain Kueh spent several weeks improving their recipe to perfect a kueh that came out right with their moulds while ensuring its texture was appetising.



Various wooden moulds and stamps were designed to cast the Porcelain Kueh and its intricate motifs.

“We met many obstacles and had to refine the size of our kueh and the texture so it could capture the intricate details,” says Ms Loh. “We also had to tweak the recipe so that the colouring would stay on after steaming.”

Evolving with time

By redesigning a heritage food like kueh, Prof Tan also hopes to teach his students that history is alive. As the students investigated the origins of different kuehs and Peranakan culture, they realised how traditions evolved with the times.

For instance, Lee Zhi Ying and Claudia Goh discovered that today’s multi-colour kueh lapis was different from the past. It used to come in just red, pink, and white and its multiple layers symbolise a long life. They revived this history with “Xiang Kueh”, their version of kueh lapis which comes in its earlier colours. It also contains a new twist. A graphic of a crane that represents longevity is partially revealed by a cut open top layer. More messages appear on the layers beneath.

“After observing how some consume kueh lapis layer by layer, we thought it would be extra meaningful to embed auspicious messages within each to help people realise the symbolism of the kueh lapis,” says Ms Lee. “Our redesign helps encourage people to slow down when eating the kueh and enjoy each layer in the process.”

The journey of reinvention has similarly helped the students better appreciate these traditional pastries.

“It takes a lot of trial and error to find the ideal design of a kueh, and those we know today have gone through many different versions to get to this point,” says Ms Kwa.

“Even though a kueh cost \$1 or \$2, it takes hours and even years to figure out what’s the right recipe and even its shape!”



The design students were helped by volunteers from the Culinary Institute of America, Singapore.

VOCAB BUILDER

parallels (say “pa-re-ls”; noun) = similarities.

NUS (say “an-yoo-es”; abbreviation) = National University of Singapore.

industrial design (say “in-das-triel de-zain”; noun) = designing of manufactured goods.

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