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## From Family Recipes to Ready-to-Cook Pastes: How Fourth-Gen Peranakan Brand O'nya is Repackaging Tradition



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If there's one cuisine where 'modern' and 'easy' are bad

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to be Peranakan cuisine. To labour over a

dish from scratch *exactly* as one's grandmother did is a point of pride – even if that means pounding spices by hand (forget tossing them in a blender) and slow-braising meats for hours. So imagine the horror of any Peranakan matriarch if you whipped out some ready-to-cook paste – from a packet, no less.

“In the eyes of a Peranakan, mass-producing Peranakan food is a sin,” says Zan Ho. “Food must be made from scratch, in the same way that was passed down for generations.” Zan should know – his great-grandmother was a first-generation Nyonya, and he grew up on his grandmother's tales of being tortured in the kitchen. In the 90s, his mother launched the now-defunct Dulukala Peranakan Restaurant in Beauty World Centre; he too followed in his family's heritage with his own restaurant, O'nya Sayang.

But these days, he's turned to sin – mass production, that is. Dubbed O'nya, his online business delivers ready-to-cook Peranakan pastes and dishes in convenient packets. For the Peranakan purist, it borders on sacrilegious. For the average time-strapped home cook today, it's a godsend – all the flavour of buah keluak in one package, with none of the soaking, shell-cracking, and pounding.

## Thinking Out of the Packet

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Zan himself learnt to cook his family recipes the traditional way: under the eagle eye of his mother and grandmother. “They were very strict on me learning the perfect way of cooking,” he laughs. After graduating from university, he was set to take charge of his family’s restaurant – but it took him five years in the kitchen before his cooking got his family’s seal of approval.

The spark for O’nya first came when Zan was still developing his own restaurant. Launched in 2011, O’nya Sayang was his bid to bring Peranakan food to a younger crowd, mixing modern twists into family recipes passed down through four generations – think buah keluak fried rice and chendol ice-cream. Making this cuisine – often so adamantly traditional – accessible has always been a passion of his.

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“In the initial stages of my restaurant, I went into an R&D project to develop more efficient ways to mass-produce Peranakan food,” Zan explains. “We managed to break down the very complex, tedious processes of cooking Peranakan food, and these pastes were the result. This allowed me to put all these complex processes into a central production kitchen and scale up capacity. The restaurant would then need to do only three simple steps of final prep.”

## Preserving the Taste of Tradition

From there, it was a short step to bringing the pastes directly to home cooks. In late 2019 – just before the COVID-19 pandemic struck – he pivoted from physical restaurants to an online paste business, delivering traditional flavours in nifty packets.

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Today, O'nya's small range spans packeted pastes and frozen ready-to-eat meals, starring iconic dishes like ayam pongteh and ayam rendang. With a shelf life of six months, anyone can enjoy buah keluak or rendang paste on a whim – simply toss into a wok along with water and your choice of meats. And while the crowd-favourite classic of ayam buah keluak takes Zan four days to prepare, home cooks can have O'nya's ready meals hot from the microwave in ten minutes.



The sticking point, of course, is taste. Can Peranakan food out of the packet match up to the taste of traditional techniques? “Managing to maintain the taste was the toughest part,” Zan admits. Besides keeping the pastes MSG- and preservative-free, special equipment and process tweaks were called for to achieve the unthinkable: “truly authentic Peranakan food which can be mass-produced”.

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But don't take his word for it – ask his grandmother. “I knew I'd succeeded in developing the paste,” he shares, “when I made my grandmother do a blind taste test – and she couldn't tell the difference between the dish cooked with paste and the dish I'd cooked from scratch.”

## Keeping Culture Alive



Mass production, packaged meals, ready-to-cook pastes – all these seem so very antithetical to the spirit of Peranakan heritage. But Zan sees this as a pathway for Peranakan cuisine to stay alive in a modern age. “If we continue to keep our traditional ways of cooking,” he believes, “this cuisine will be lost in the next two generations.”

So far, much of the resistance to O'nya's concept has come from the older generation. For younger Peranakans, it's a different story. "Some of them don't get to eat these dishes at home anymore as their parents are too old to cook or have passed away. Often they didn't learn the recipe from their parents, or they're too busy to cook from scratch," he shares. O'nya's products make it possible for them to bring back the taste of home.



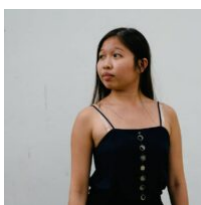
With the pandemic striking shortly after launch, O'nya is still finding its footing in the market. But big plans lie ahead – Zan reveals that he's currently working with the Health Promotion Board to create a range of healthier pastes for today's health-conscious eaters. His biggest dream? To become the brand that represents Peranakan paste in Singapore. "We're very keen on keeping this culture alive for the generations that

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follow. We hope that through our brand and products, we can do this.”

Shop O'nya online [here](#).

*This interview was made possible with the help of Starhub's Small Business Day, an initiative to drive awareness and support for small businesses in Singapore. Learn more or apply for the initiative [here](#).*



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*Jolene has a major sweet tooth and would happily eat pastries for all meals. When she's not dreaming of cheesecake, she can be found in the dance studio, working on craft projects, or curled up with a good book.*



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