



## Recipes for success

You don't need to be a Michelin chef to set up a culinary school, but you do need passion and some skills

by Hellen Fong

**T**he stress of modern life, especially for women who constantly struggle to keep a balance between work and home, has led many to look for de-stressing activities. One popular activity is cooking and baking, which are said to be therapeutic. Many have donned aprons and spend their spare time attending classes to improve their cooking and baking skills. To answer this demand, quite a number of cooking and baking schools have sprung up in the Klang Valley in the last few years.

What does it take to run a successful cooking or baking school, you might ask. You do not necessarily need to be a certified chef or baker, but you need skills and passion for cooking and baking, say the culinary entrepreneurs Personal Money spoke to.

A few years ago, Nancy Tan, 42, and Shyamala Devaraj, 36, colleagues in a multinational IT company, took up baking and decorating cakes in their leisure time and found that quality cake decorating items and tools were not easily available. In 2008, eager to share their knowledge and skills, they gave up their careers and turned their hobby into a business, setting up Cake Connection, a cake-decorating speciality store and baking school in Jaya One, a business park in Petaling Jaya.

As an enthusiastic young student at the Cordon Bleu London, Rohani Jelani loved coming up with great recipes. She later spent hundreds of backbreaking hours in a commercial kitchen before becoming a resident food writer for a women's magazine. It was a natural progression for her to teach her friends to cook and she later set up her cooking school, Bayan Indah, in her own kitchen in Kampung Sg Penchala, Kuala Lumpur in 2000.

Edyth Ban, 33, a retail product manager, and two of her sisters combined their strengths in marketing and baking to set up The Cooking House in Sri Hartamas three years ago. Today, the school is popular among cooking and baking enthusiasts from the neighbourhood.

Here's what they have to say about running a culinary school.

### Running the business

Although one does not need to have certification as a baker or chef, one

does need to have the right cooking and baking skills. Tan and Shymala conduct classes themselves while Ban and her sisters hire freelance bakers and chefs who share their specialities. Certified chef Rohani still goes on food trips to learn from both professional chefs and *makciks* in kampungs.

The entrepreneurs agree that repeat customers are important; about 30% of their students return for more classes. With their past experience in marketing, Tan and Shyamala found the Internet to be an effective marketing tool. Their cake decorating items and tools are sold on their website, [www.cakeconnection.com.my](http://www.cakeconnection.com.my), and

customers are kept updated via Facebook and Twitter. Ban, who also finds the Internet useful, sends out her monthly class schedule to over 10,000 people in her database. Rohani, on the other hand, says conventional word of mouth is the best marketing tool for her.

According to the entrepreneurs, the initial set-up cost ranges from RM150,000 to RM500,000, depending on the type of premises, concept and kitchen facilities. Cake Connection and The Cooking House operate out of shoplots while Rohani has converted part of her bungalow home into a working kitchen. Whichever concept you choose, you should be able to recoup your start-up investment within a year or two, say the entrepreneurs.

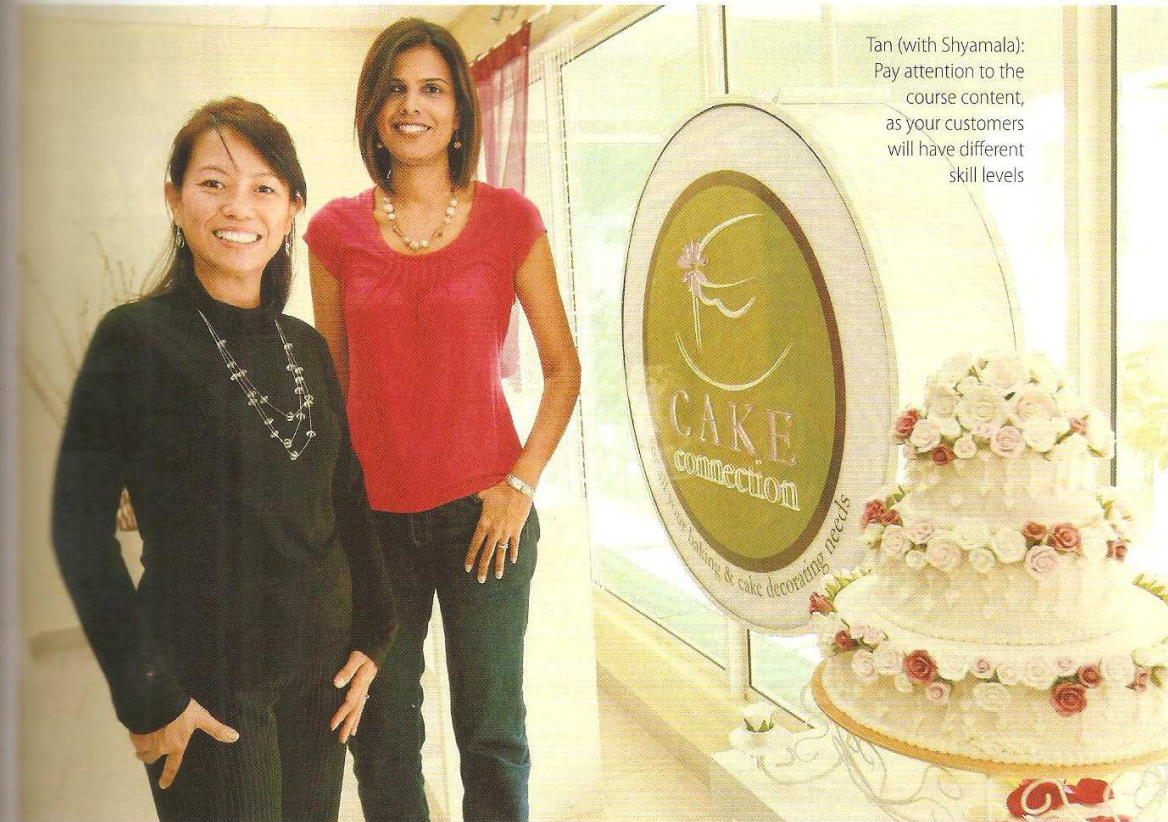
Monthly running costs go to ingredients, salaries and rental. "As I teach the cooking classes myself, I also allocate spending on my research projects. I go on several trips a year to track down and record interesting recipes which I incorporate into my classes," says Rohani. "To set your pricing for the classes, you will also need to have a good guesstimate of the cost of ingredients and number of support staff needed for each class."

Both Tan and Shyamala teach about 50% of their classes whilst the rest are taught by freelance bakers carefully screened and chosen for specific baking and cake decoration classes. They agree that picking up professional courses to improve their skills are important and find it adds a personal touch to teach the classes themselves.

For Ban, a large portion of the monthly costs goes to the fees of freelancers. "If you engage freelancers, you need to carefully screen them to ensure they have the credentials and experience to teach



Rohani: Having a wide range of class themes helps to attract both locals and tourists



Tan (with Shyamala): Pay attention to the course content, as your customers will have different skill levels

as the reputation of the school is important.”

### Challenges

Bayan Indah’s customers are varied, ranging from locals who want to create a favourite dish for their family to tourists who fly in specially to learn about Malaysian food. “Having varied options on the menu is important to prevent boredom and monotony,” explains Rohani, who updates her cooking themes often. “It is also crucial to keep up with the trends and the latest in the industry,” Ban agrees, “To ensure that your customers keep coming back for more classes, you have to be creative and constantly come up with new recipes and new chefs and bakers to teach the classes.”

“It is also crucial to pay attention to the course content when designing your classes as your customers will have different skill levels,” says Tan. Cake Connection’s customer base is also a varied lot ranging from novice bakers to hobbyists to professional bakers as their classes are designed based on an individual’s learning capability.

“While the quality of the chefs and recipes are important, it is also equally important to effectively manage and limit wastage of ingredients,” shares Ban.

### Success factors

“Having a wide range of class themes helps to attract both locals and tourists,” says Rohani. “Making

sure that everything is well planned so that the classes run smoothly is also crucial.” Rohani is able to run ad-hoc classes, catering to students’ requests, if adequate notice is given. Ban, whose customers range from children to adults, agrees that the key to success is to cater to different levels of cooking skills and age groups. “It is also important to create a good learning environment, with a modern and fully equipped kitchen.”

“If you are engaging freelance instructors, they have to be well skilled, have good teaching methods, speak clearly and most importantly, have the spirit of sharing. It is crucial for the customers to be satisfied that their money is well spent,” says Tan. ■