

For the Record

Third-generation owner of the company behind some of Singapore's most iconic notebooks, Winnie Chan is writing a new page in the local stationery business, as Melissa Gail Sing discovers

EFORE THE ADVENT OF IPADS, smartphones and other e-organisers, there were the trusty 555 notebooks. Kept safe in men's shirt pockets and women's purses, they were indispensable stores of important phone numbers, addresses, dates, expenses, inventory and other lists. Few would know that these treasures of our past—like the LightHouse bookkeeping ledgers and multihued Tulip flat cardboard files used in schools and hospitals—have been made by Grandluxe, a homegrown company that started as a small bindery workshop in 1942. It specialises in bookbinding, letterpress printing and leather products and has its own in-house stationery brands such as Monologue and Paperluxe, which are sold in stationery stores. It also customises products for corporate and private clients.

Recently, Winnie Chan, a third-generation owner of the family business, has given the industry's somewhat oldish image fresh appeal with Bynd Artisan, a chic atelier cum retail space and workshop. More than just a means to stay competitive in the digital age where machines have displaced man in the production process, this offshoot of the parent company is the product of Winnie's desire to preserve the artisanal spirit.

"I've chosen to introduce Bynd Artisan now because there is a renewed appreciation for well-made stationery and leather products, as well as a burgeoning interest in handmade things. Our craftsmen have perfected their skills over decades, and the atelier allows them to pass on this tradition of craftsmanship. It's all about making the industry less fuddy-duddy and more sexy. The higher the profile of a stationery craftsman, the more interest we can garner from the younger generation," says Winnie.

"My husband James and I wanted to create a dedicated space that could showcase the different aspects of Bynd Artisan. We wanted a retail space for our One in a Million notebooks, Ready-made by Bynd—the brand's mainline—designer capsule collections, as well as the workshop area to be under one roof. The atelier is also about being experiential, so guests can touch and feel the products or work with our craftsmen to create bespoke items in a welcoming atmosphere."

Indeed, the space, although tucked away in Boon Lay's industrial area, has turned into a hip playground for individuals from all over the country who go to appreciate good design and quality, and literally have a hand in creating their own stationery. At the atelier, they can peruse different leathers in uber-cool shades, feel their way through a range of luxurious paper stock, and explore different binding options before seeing their own one-of-a-kind journal come together —whether created on their own under supervision or by skilled craftsmen.

On weekdays, private and corporate clients can be seen browsing diaries, leatherette cards and journals with soft Italian leather covers. In another section, there is a range of fine leather goods such as the four-way Quadro Bag in calf leather and a passport holder with slots for SIM cards. Come weekends, the space, which boasts a beverage bar, is abuzz with activity as master craftsmen like 71-year-old Chong Beng Cheng move away from the production floor to conduct workshops where participants get to make their own leather card holder or notebook, or learn the intricacies of Chinese bookbinding.

As a child, Winnie had plenty of fun at the Grandluxe factory back when it was housed in a little shophouse along Mohamed Sultan Road. At home, she relished the stories recounted by her father, who took over the business at the age of 18 after his father's demise. Since she was a preschooler, she aspired to become her father's secretary. So passionate was she about realising her youthful dream that at 17, she joined the Grandluxe export team for exhibitions in Europe and even based her A-level school project on the business. She joined Grandluxe right after



obtaining her degree in Economics at the University of California, Berkeley.

"This is my first job and probably my last. I remember very fondly during my initial years with the company, my dad would bring me along for meetings locally and overseas, and all I did was to sit quietly and take notes. Years later, I'd still refer to those notes to help me recall, say, the name of a competitor a client had mentioned," says Winnie.

With Bynd Artisan still in its infancy, her day now involves numerous internal and external meetings. The petite lady with a sharp sense of style is also heavily involved in product development and raw material sourcing. A considerable amount of her time is spent seeking out new collaborators to grow Bynd Artisan into an iconic Singapore brand. Last November, a shop-in-shop was set up at Tangs Orchard's Christmas Shop so shoppers could customise their own notebooks, and more of such pop-up initiatives are in the pipeline. "The next stage we will be embarking on shortly is franchising this business concept overseas," Winnie shares.

In order to promote artisanal excellence, she believes collaborations with like-minded individuals are essential. Already, such tie-ups have led to interesting products that are not limited to stationery (see sidebar). "We have been lucky to work with a talented group of Singaporean artists and designers. Bynd Artisan creates another platform for local artists to create something different from what they normally do," she says. "We will be looking beyond paper and leather. We are seeking more experts in other artisanal skills that are different from ours to work with."

Winnie's appreciation for finely made products extends to art. Particularly drawn to Renaissance paintings, she enjoys visiting art museums all over the world, from The Metropolitan Museum of Art to the Louvre. Most recently, she attended the Biennale of Sydney and visited the Art Gallery of New South Wales. "I love to look at how people lived in the olden days through paintings," she shares.

Someone who clearly looks at life through a different lens, the mother of two reveals that she doesn't watch TV, preferring instead to get her news by reading. She also enjoys stories about inspiring women throughout history such as Marie Antoinette and their influence on society. For her indefatigable drive in preserving a legacy of artisanship and writing a new chapter in the history of locally made stationery, we can't help but add Winnie to the list of people to watch on our own little notebook. •



EXCHANGING NOTES

Backed by a philosophy of promoting local talent, Bynd Artisan has been working with some of the country's best-known names in design and art to launch capsule collections.

President's Design Award 2014 laureate Larry Peh, whose

firm & Larry steered the design of the Bynd Artisan Atelier space, was the first to collaborate with the brand on a collection that includes document holders, a T-shirt with a leather pocket and a wallet under the Sign of Our Times capsule collection. Other collections to be introduced in the coming months include collaborations with award-winning photographer John Clang, moving sketch artist Erwin Lian and singer-songwriter Gentle Bones.



"Such collaborations are atypical in Singapore's local stationery scene. But there is a common thread: we are all seasoned professionals, very discerning and we demand high standards. Hence, the result will not be run-of-the-mill. These collaborations allow

us to gain experience in product design through which we can implement and adapt our own ready-made products to," says Bynd Artisan owner Winnie Chan.

