Breaking New Ground

Whether it’s publishing a debut novel, venturing into new business territory or changing the way we eat, find out how these six individuals are making 2017 just that little bit more interesting for the rest of us.

NEW BOOK

FELICIA YAP
First-time author

Felicia Yap is living the dream of all first-time writers, with her debut novel sparking a fierce bidding war among some of the biggest publishing houses in the UK and the US.

The right to print her psychological thriller Yesterday was finally won by Alex Clarke, publishing director of Headline’s new imprint, Wildfire. Mr Clarke, who worked for Penguin Random House for 15 years, is behind the success of blockbusters such as Sebastian Faulks’ Devil May Care and Sylvia Day’s Crossfire series.
Market voices on:

For the UK and Commonwealth book rights, the London-based Ms Yap received a “healthy” six-figure sum as an advance. The book is now set to be translated into 11 languages including Japanese, Chinese, French, German, Polish and Russian. She has also been approached by film producers for the rights to turn the book into a movie.

SEE ALSO: Finding his true culinary voice

It's been a heady, rollercoaster 2016 for the 36-year-old daughter of a Malaysian bank officer and housewife. Never in her wildest dreams did she imagine submitting her first novel to a literary agent who regularly goes through 15000 manuscripts a year - and hearing back from him the very next day. “It was just crazy,” she says.

Ms Yap has been based in the UK since her university days when she enrolled in Imperial College to pursue biochemistry. Before that, she did her A-Levels in Hwa Chong Junior College and did a short work attachment in The Business Times as an arts reporter.

But after graduating and working for a few months at the prestigious European Molecular Biology Laboratory in Heidelberg, “I became convinced I didn’t want to spend my life in a lab coat working in the sterile confines of a laboratory. I still preferred the artistic world.”

She went back to school. Cambridge University this time, to pursue history, and subsequently graduating with a PhD in history in 2008/2009. She went on to teach in Cambridge and the London School of Economics, but the writing bug never left her.

A fateful moment came when a strange woman befriended her on Facebook, thinking Ms Yap was her former classmate at Faber Academy, a writing school. Ms Yap met her on a whim, to ask about her experiences at the school. After the meeting, she went home, clicked on the school’s webpage and signed up for the six-month course.

She stopped teaching to focus on creative writing, and completed the manuscript in eight months. “When you’re writing your first novel, you have no clue how people would respond to it or if any agents would take it on - let alone find a publisher for it.”

But in February, she sent a PDF copy to Jonny Geller, joint CEO of Curtis Brown, one of the world’s leading literary agencies. By noon the next day, she got a call from Mr Geller, who had read half of it and was “interested”. After a few rounds of editing, Mr Geller sent the manuscript to publishing houses and the response was “amazing”, says Ms Yap.
They received a preemption from a publisher, which means they were offered a sum for the book on the condition they did not put it on auction. But Mr Geller and Ms Yap rejected the preemption and the bidding war began.

While Mr Clarke won the UK and Commonwealth rights, Alexandra Machinist of ICM Partners, the literary agent for Kevin Kwan’s Crazy Rich Asians, sold the US rights to Mulholland Books. Mulholland Books is the imprint of Little, Brown, which publishes J.K. Rowling’s books.

Ms Yap says: “We had auctions in various territories, including surprising places like Serbia. In China, nine publishers bid for the rights. The international response has been unbelievable. I’d never thought it could resonate with people all around the world.”

Yesterday - which is targeted for an August 2017 release - is set in the future, where people have extremely short memories and rely on their entries in their iDiary, a creation of Apple, to recall what happened the day before. The catch, however, is that, like selfies, people only record what they wish to project to themselves and perhaps the world. Facts are not important and self-deception is rife.

Against this backdrop, a murder takes place involving an aspiring Member of Parliament. The detective assigned to the case has only one day to solve it before he, like everyone else, forgets the facts of the case.

Ms Yap calls Yesterday “a circadian novel” because it starts in the morning and ends before the following day. She says: “The appeal of the novel, I think, is that all of us have a strong desire to remember our past. And we use our smartphones, photographs, iCloud and other forms of technology to record and recall it.

"Ironically, in this age of information overload, our capacity to remember important things is diminished by the barrage of news and images around us. And we turn to technology more and more as a kind of second brain.

"But what are we choosing to remember and forget? And how are we deceiving ourselves in the way we see the world? I think we all have strong capacity for self-delusion, which is a key theme for the novel.”

- by Helmi Yusof

NEW HOTEL

WEE TENG WEN
Managing Partner,
The Lo & Behold Group

Wee Teng Wen never set out to build a restaurant group. But now he has, with a string of eateries from casual (OverEasy) to garden-centric (White Rabbit) to fine dining (Odette).

The 36-year-old never set out to open hotels, either. But now he has one - The Warehouse Hotel on Havelock Road, which opens on Jan 1. The 37-room hotel is owned by I Associated Company and will be operated by The Lo & Behold Group.

As with many of his group's concepts, opening a hotel was not part of some long-term business strategy. Instead, falling in love with a space and the potential to tell its story in a way that disrupts prevailing notions is what usually dictates each of his new projects.
"When we visited the Warehouse site, we immediately fell in love with the space and the rich heritage it was steeped in. That was when we knew that a hotel was the next project for us," he says.

The three warehouses were built in the late 19th century, and later housed a spirits distillery before it was converted into Warehouse Disco. When the disco closed in 1996, the warehouses were marked a heritage site and lay silent.

Mr Wee says that the group has always been passionate about creating amazing, unforgettable experiences for its guests through its F&B concepts. "Venturing into the hotel industry just seemed like a natural extension of what we love to do, both in concept, design and guest experience," he says.

While he never spent any Saturday nights dancing at the Warehouse Disco, Mr Wee recalls always passing by this iconic building. He has a knack for giving old buildings a new life - take The Quadrant, an iconic low-rise art deco building amidst the skyscrapers of Cecil Street, which he turned into The Black Swan and The Powder Room.

On his love for old spaces, Mr Wee says, "more than only conserving buildings, it is truly exciting to add our own flourish as we bring these spaces back to life. We weave our ideas into the core of our venues - there are equal parts rejuvenation and preservation at play."

For The Warehouse, Mr Wee engaged design firm Asylum to “protect the real industrial heritage of this space while creating a new perspective on what it means to be industrial.” By that he means not following the industrial cliche of having exposed brick walls. The interiors will be more elegant and refined, featuring light grey concrete walls, brass racks, and accent pieces made of wood, fabric and rattan.

The first-time hotel operator says that "the real journey will begin when the hotel opens”. He’s aware that 2017 could be a challenging year, given the number of new properties such as the nearby InterContinental Robertson Quay. But "we are well-placed and distinctive enough to stand on our own."

2016, he says, has been a good year for the group, and he is optimistic about 2017. Besides the opening of The Warehouse Hotel, the group will launch two more F&B related projects, which Mr Wee is keeping mum about for now. "But we will refresh The White Rabbit, which turns 10 soon, and we will renovate OverEasy One Fullerton."

The year also saw Odette receiving two Michelin stars. "The team is overjoyed, and the stars are a testament to the strength of the team and the amazing effort that they put in," says Mr Wee.

New openings and retaining stars aside, Mr Wee says that the secret to keeping the group going strong has been a “deep emphasis on people”.

He says that when Lo & Behold first started 11 years ago, looking at the profitability of each brand or business unit was the main focus. "I was always thinking about ideas and strategies for each of my venues. Over the years, I’ve realised the importance of a company that functions on a group level," he says.

Hence, he spent the last few years finding, grooming and retaining the best talent; building a company culture, shaping the group’s values, missions and culture. "Evolving as an entrepreneur meant learning to prioritise people over profits, long-term benefits over short-term gains."

With a hotel now in his portfolio, there will be inevitable comparisons with well-known
hotelier/restaurateur Loh Lik Peng.

"I have a huge amount of respect for Peng, but we operate very differently," says Mr Wee.

While Mr Loh’s Unlisted Collection has expanded to Shanghai, Sydney and London, Mr Wee has no overseas plans.

"I follow my heart when choosing project spaces. I'm very happy to operate in Singapore," he says.

- By Tay Suan Chiang

NEW DEVELOPER

Rina Raj
CEO, B Capital

When she was still a student at CHIJ, Rina Raj’s favourite lunch was the roast duck rice at Carlton Restaurant, a coffeeshop along East Coast Road.

Little did she realise that one day, she would be the owner of that very coffeeshop and the two floors above it. Now called Carlton Place, it is the 26-year-old’s first commercial property since she became CEO of B Capital.

B Capital, formerly known as Baby Capital, was started by Ms Raj’s mother, Judy Chan, in 1999. It was rebranded as B Capital in 2013. Ms Chan is a director of the firm. Besides Carlton Place, B Capital also owns and manages commercial and retail units in buildings such as Far East Plaza and The Adelphi.

Ms Raj - an only child - is poised to take the family’s real estate business in a new direction, beginning with Carlton Place. Located at 237 East Coast Road, the building dates back more than 50 years. Ms Raj can’t wait for the refurbishment to be complete. "We are looking at end January, before Chinese New Year," she says. She worked with RSP Architects on the project, and had to adhere to conservation rules to restore the facade. But they were allowed to build an extension at the back to increase the gross floor area.

Despite her young age, Ms Raj is drawn to conservation buildings which "have their own charm and beauty", and her aim is to be able to marry conservation with commercial viability.

This is despite bracing for a challenging 2017, “with more uncertainties, interest rate hikes and a slowdown in the economy.”

A self-confessed conservative businesswoman, she adds that “prudence” will influence her next property purchase. Even so, she’s hoping to find another conservation building that allows her to increase the gross floor area to turn it into a lifestyle hub.

"I imagine this second building to be a one stop place, where there will be dining and fitness options, and a communal space for people to hang out," she says. She hopes to diversify the business, such as going into the co-sharing and co-living spaces. Ideally, she would like to focus on conservation buildings, but she is fully aware that “they are hard to come by.”

When Carlton Restaurant came up for sale, she felt it had potential. "It is in a good corner location, and is
she says. The previous owner, who used to own the roast duck stall, remembers her fondly. The unit, together with the two upper floors was bought for $11 million. When it opens, it will house a restaurant, Firebake; a yoga studio; and a communal roof terrace.

She admits that most people are surprised to find out that the CEO of B Capital is “so young and a lady”, but Ms Raj will have you know she’s not the sort to bark orders from her desk while filing her nails.

“I’m very hands on, and do whatever paperwork that I need to do on my own. When I’m down on site, I have my hard hat and rubber shoes on, definitely no heels,” she says. She finds that architects and contractors tend to go easy on her because of her age. “They are very willing to share advice, and it is comforting to know that,” she says. She is fluent in Mandarin and Hindi, and understands Cantonese and Hainanese, which come in handy when working with the contractors.

Ms Raj says going into property is a natural step for her. After graduating in arts and social sciences at the National University of Singapore (NUS) she earned her graduate certificate in real estate finance, also from NUS. She also took up a real estate sales person course, to better understanding the workings of the industry.

She is close to her mother, whom she calls Mama at work. “Mum is a great mentor and very supportive of me,” says Ms Raj. “She never takes no for an answer, and taught me that failure is not the end.”

The camera-shy Ms Raj prefers to let her work speak for her, and is focused on work, even on her days off. She enjoys yoga and is fond of visiting cafes. “I enjoy a good coffee and also it’s a chance for me to see how others have decked out their spaces. Plus I enjoy interior design as a hobby.”

She says it is “definitely a dream to own many properties across Singapore. It would be even better if they are all conservation buildings.”

- By Tay Suan Chiang

NEW BOSS

Sarah Martin
CEO, Arts House Ltd

Singapore arts has a new champion, and her name is Sarah Martin. The former Singapore Grand Prix's director of operations took over the helm of Arts House Limited (AHL) earlier this month, and plans to to build upon its brand using her "unique skill set of bridging the private and government sector, the commercial and the artistic."

Her new portfolio involves running the Singapore International Festival of Arts (SIFA), The Arts House on Old Parliament Lane, Aliwal Arts Centre on Aliwal Street and the Goodman Arts Centre on Goodman Road. Come August 2017, she and her team will also manage Victoria Theatre, Victoria Concert Hall, and the Drama Centre - an expansion of responsibilities from the previous team headed by Lee Chor Lin.

Ms Martin, 41, is no stranger to the festival scene. Before she joined the Singapore Grand Prix, she was involved with the international arts festival Womad for over 10 years. She was the operations manager for Womad Singapore before becoming the festival director and later the regional operations manager of Asia.
Ms Martin's appointment ends months of speculation over who would succeed Ms Lee after she stepped down in September. Ms Lee had made headlines two years ago over a spat with festival director Ong Keng Sen. Though they patched up, observers say the relationship remains tense.

She comes to the job even as other arts institutions have lost their own leaders. Former Singapore Art Museum (SAM) director Susie Lingham stepped down in Dec 2015 after two years on the job. The museum's CEO Leng Tshua resigned in July 2016 after less than one year. In October, the National Arts Council’s CEO Kathy Lai left to return to her former employer IE Singapore as deputy CEO (Special Duties). Her NAC post has yet to be filled.

Ms Martin admits arts leadership is complex. "One of the toughest things in the arts scene is growing the audience. There are two types of audiences: one with an already strong interest in the arts, and another that needs to be converted. So programming is always a delicate balance between works by familiar names and those that are new and unfamiliar. As always, I'm thinking about how to expose audiences to these works, because that's the starting point of anything."

She is totally at home talking about "an eco-system of audience development, artist development, venue management, funding, marketing and PR - we need to see how each venue can be branded precisely so it can maximise its potential and get its target audience".

She is also aware of the soft skills demanded of an arts leader. "Artists have a different point of view and a unique stand. I've handled the Linkin Parks of this world in my two previous jobs. And those jobs had very high deliverables too.

"But I think there's no 'trick' to it - you need to listen and understand where the other person is coming from, have a dialogue, and see which of those needs you can deliver to find a win-win situation for all."

- By Helmi Yusof

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NEW RESTAURANT

Ivan Brehm
Chef

He spent 17 years working in kitchens non-stop - several in The Fat Duck which gave him the resume that led him to Singapore to head the restaurant Bacchanalia for four years in two locations. Then suddenly, on Dec 15, Ivan Brehm - who led Bacchanalia to its first Michelin star - shocked the industry by quitting.

Was he burnt out? Could he not take the stress of maintaining the Michelin star? Was he going to Japan? Was he contemplating a new career as a shoe salesman? No, no, no and no.

But yes, he did feel the need to take a break and take stock of what he wanted out of his life. Currently back home in Brazil for Christmas "to visit family whom I haven't seen in eons", he says he's taking time off to "assess with greater clarity what the next move should be".

While he won't give specific details, there are enough hints that a new restaurant is in the offing.

"I am excited about the prospect of doing something, and am almost certain - after considering many possibilities, that I will remain in Singapore. I love this country and its energy, and how it lends itself to
pursuing one’s dream.”

While Chef Brehm, 32, has always had an original approach to cuisine, he had more of a cult following than a mainstream one. The Michelin star, however, succeeded in introducing more Singaporeans to his style of cooking. “Guests find it easier to try and experiment, and though I am aware we are not for everyone, I also see a deeper need to connect to a wider audience.

“I will continue to explore the thin line between casual and fine dining, and cook food that is more left of centre, but I’m hopeful that with greater autonomy as a chef-owner (in his new venture), this can be communicated better.”

He reckons that while the Singapore dining scene is “vibrant and challenging”, he wishes that diners could be more “more receptive to change, and less particular about what is comfortable”.

Pointing to a “disconnect between some incredibly talented chefs and their mainstream appeal”, Chef Brehm says that 2016 was a year of soul-searching for him over what direction he wanted to take as a chef; therefore his decision to leave Bacchanalia and make a fresh start.

But lest one think of him as a tortured artist with great knife skills, he’s not lost sight of a chef’s fundamental role - to cook delicious food.

His next venture will be “a restaurant as a place of human interaction that includes the staff,” he says. “Open kitchens that are transparent and human. The food I cook has evolved over time and I’m happy that I see (myself as) a more mature chef, able to make tighter connections between a guest’s desire and a chef’s impulse. Simplicity, authenticity, tasty and borderless food is what I’m striving to cook.”

From the looks of things, diners may well see Chef Brehm back in action within the first half of 2017. No doubt with a much-needed fresh perspective on dining. Watch this space.

- By Jaime Ee

NEW SERVICE

Takashi Yamada
Founder, tableall.com

A love for Japanese cuisine and a desire to bridge the gap between unfriendly traditional chefs and non-Japanese-speaking gourmets led Takashi Yamada to create the unique reservation system Tableall.

“My friends always asked me to book restaurants in Japan and I didn’t realise how hard it was for foreigners,” says the 38-year-old who was a Goldman Sachs trader for 15 years before leaving in March 2016.

“Some restaurants don’t take reservations and they have to go through a hotel concierge but it’s slow and doesn’t always work. So I booked restaurants for them all the time, and I thought this might be a good chance to make this a business.”

Tableall is an online booking platform which launched in September, offering reservations at 11 restaurants that he handpicked in Tokyo. How it works is that every week, Mr Yamada holds two seats at each
restaurant under his name, and Tableall members can book these seats (they average about 30,000 yen or S$370 per seat) at a booking fee of 3,000 yen (approx. S$37) per seat. Eventually he plans to extend it to restaurants outside of Tokyo.

It’s a big risk, he admits, especially since that means forking out a sum of about S$8,000 to the restaurants every week whether he fills the seats or not. But it’s a necessary one when dealing with old-fashioned Japanese restaurant owners who resist technology and don’t quite need the money.

"It’s very difficult to talk to Japanese restaurant chefs because they’re pretty old-fashioned, stubborn and traditional," observes Mr Yamada. "And those that are popular don’t need booking services."

Unlike booking services which charge the restaurants, Mr Yamada removes the two main obstacles that Japanese restaurant owners face when taking reservations from foreigners - language barrier and cancellation risks.

The language issue is solved through his website, which has photos and profiles of each restaurant written in English. As for cancellation fears, his upfront payments mean that he alone takes the risks. So far, he’s been able to fill all his seats. He now has a decent base of 800 members, mainly well-heeled individuals from his strong network built during his Goldman years. They’re mainly from Japan, Singapore, Australia, Hong Kong, US, UK and Thailand. Almost a third are Singaporeans. The business is based in Singapore, where Mr Yamada and his family had been living, although he is in the midst of moving to Sydney.

Being an ex-money man, Mr Yamada knows that at S$37 a seat, he’s not going to make a lot of money from Tableall. ‘It’s not a scalable business but at least it’s meaningful for the Japanese economy. Food is a big part of our culture that we can sell. So I tell restaurants, ‘I know you’re fully-booked, but for the future of Japan, I need your help’. If I talk too much about money they won’t entertain me, so I try to appeal to their heart. That’s how it works right?’

We sure hope it does.

- By Rachel Loi

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Doing so well, however, holds significant potential to help new entrants secure a long-term competitive advantage. Omidyar Network and Oliver Wyman set out to investigate current revenue practices among financial health entrepreneurs. The goal was to uncover specific emerging practices that successfully align revenue with value creation for consumers on a sustainable basis.