

IT'S a battle that many parents may be familiar with. In the red corner, a toddler wears a frown, the downturned mouth in defiance as blood rises to colour the cheeks suggesting the threat of a little tantrum. Meanwhile, in the green corner sits a very innocent-looking broccoli floret. Or spinach. Or whatever vegetable or food that happens to disagree with the toddler. The outcome of such a battle can go either way, depending on the parent's strategy and level of patience.

For Michelle Lim, who was trying to encourage her daughter to eat, the turning point came when she discovered beautiful child-friendly bento photos posted online by Japanese mums. "I never thought of becoming a food artist. I just wanted to solve the problem of feeding my first child," shares the soft-spoken mother of two with a gentle demeanour.

Adding, she recalls: "At the time she was fething. She lost her appetite, she didn't enjoy her food at all and refused most food." Taking her inspiration from those photos, Lim attempted to create something cute to spark her daughter's interest in food. It worked!

Not only did her girl start eating more food she also became willing to try new vegetables. That success triggered a new hobby.

The Kedah-born woman enthuses: "I



*Don't always hope for others to bring you happiness. You are the one who can create happiness to you and people around you.*

Michelle Lim

# Happiness on a plate

With a plate or bento box as her canvas, Michelle Lim creates humble works of art with the simplest of foods, writes Karen Ho



*A cute and friendly bento box to brighten up a child's lunch time.*

found it amazing so I started to learn the basic skills of food art, and slowly I became addicted to it."

### EDIBLE CREATIONS

Scrolling through Lim's Instagram account will elicit many expressions of "awww" and "wow" from her audience. From famous cartoon characters like the minions and Moana to adorable generic animals such as bunnies and bears, there's just so much cuteness and colour in her edible creations that it could fill a dozen Disney movies.

Bumblebees made of cooked egg yolks fly past clouds cut out from cooked egg whites. A spaghetti-based Winnie the Pooh face pokes out from a bowl of red sauce. Doritos on a stick, mashed potato Minnie Mouse, a rabbit head made from a boiled egg. The possibilities of creating edible art are endless and they can be made by utilizing ingredients that are commonly found in any kitchen or at least they can be easily purchased.

Apart from rice, mashed potato is another frequently used ingredient in her food art. "My daughter likes it and it's easy to mould, even easier than rice. Also hard-boiled egg. Vegetable are great too because you can cut a carrot into a flower, an apple can turn into a rabbit, also cheese slice because it's quite easy to change the shape."

The word "easy" crops up a lot during our conversation and I want to believe that I too can recreate Po the kungfu panda, or transform a breakfast bowl into a vibrant fruit paradise despite having no known sculpting skills.

### EASY PEASY

The beauty of Lim's creations is that anyone can learn to do it too, a fact that she demonstrates in workshops, where participants learn basic skills and techniques such as using a toothpick to cut shapes from a cheese slice. "I want them to create magic out of ordinary food that you have in your kitchen. A tomato is no longer a tomato."

Over the recent National Day weekend, she conducted such a workshop, hosted by boutique property developer Trilerra Metropolis, as part of its efforts to connect with the community.

With a background in



lecturing Human Resource Management and no culinary or food styling training whatsoever, this self-taught food artist admits that her first attempt to inject visual appeal into her daughter's food was far from Instagram-worthy. "It was just rice in a car-shaped mould that



*The most challenging food art for Lim.*



**FROM LEFT:** Celebrating Mother's Day bento-style; Besides cartoon and cute characters, Lim's food art sometimes contains festive or social themes. The recent issue of child brides inspired this creation. Sketching her designs beforehand helps Lim work faster with the food and to capture any ideas that strike her while out.

PICTURES BY NURUL SHAFIQAH JEMENON

I bought... very ugly! But she found it cute enough. Later on, I added some cheese and eyes, facial expression, then she was even more thrilled. Children are very easy to satisfy," quips the youthful mother.

When she first started, Lim was equipped with just patience and an inclination towards the arts. Trial and error were her teachers. Her meticulous character steered her towards making things manually, such as the shape of an eye, instead of relying on shortcuts like a food puncher for facial expressions or food drawing pen.

The epitome of the perfect housewife and mother, this demure 40-year-old sets aside time to craft something new and nutritious when the children are at school or asleep. Her daughter and son, who are 10 and 6 respectively, inspire most of her creations. "They will come home and tell me about their day or about the cartoon or animation that they like."

Naturally, cartoon themes and cutesy characters make up the majority of her food art postings, however, occasionally, there are other designs to mark special occasions like Merdeka Day, Chinese New Year and Mother's Day. Even the recent issue of child brides was highlighted on a plate.

On average, her creations take about half an hour and to help her work faster, she sketches her design first. A quick

flip through her sketchbook shows mostly pencil-work with a few in colour too. A more complicated design may take 45 minutes to make but she can also whip up a simple one in 10 minutes.

Without having to ask, she immediately dishes out a quick tip for beginners. "I mentioned bread. The easiest character for first timers is Winnie the Pooh. Because you know why... just two circles as the eyes, the nose triangle and the two eyebrows. That's it. If you have more time, cut two circles as the ears so the whole bread slice becomes Winnie. Hello Kitty has even more simple features. No mouth! So I recommend these two characters."

Asked which has been her most challenging creation so far, without hesitation, Lim exclaims: "Tun Mahathir", referring to the time she stretched her creative boundaries by creating a smiling portrait of our current prime minister comprising mashed potato.

It was her first attempt at sculpting a proper human face, taking her an hour to complete the feat. "It's hard to have accuracy, hard to get the right expression, that's why I prefer to make cartoons!" she confesses chirpily. Her husband's food

also receives Lim's creative touches. Upon showing us a sample photo of his breakfast, a loud chorus of "wahhhhh!" jells the air. It's the most beautiful bowl of oatmeal I've ever seen, decorated with colourful fruits in various motifs and shapes. "One simple trick to make your food beautiful," she divulges, "... is to put as many colours as possible. And this is the healthy way of eating too."

**CREATING HAPPINESS**

The food art has moved beyond the idea of just motivating a child to eat. To Lim, making a beautiful bento is easy, but "... I have to make sure my bento has a story, talk about my children or bring some memory to certain people".

One of her food art depicted a Mamee monster and it delighted her to receive some comments from people who were reminded of their childhood snack. Chuckling, she shares: "Then they go buy a packet of Mamee! That's what I'm trying to do... to connect with others."



Despite starting off with no such intentions, Lim's efforts unwittingly led to business opportunities that have seen her collaborating with companies and brands, and led to her authoring a couple of bento recipe books. When it comes to collaborations, she admits to being selective. "Every piece of my food art means something. It carries a story. So I would pick certain partners, for example, Triferra, because their philosophy and principles really suit me. They're trying to connect to people and so does my food art."

There are no business plans for the future. No grand designs. As long as her creations can have meaning and bring happiness to herself and others, this humble food artist is quite satisfied with what she has now.

"Food art is not just a hobby or business," says Lim, her voice low. "It helps me to relieve my tension when I'm loaded with a lot of housework and children. Whenever I create something like birthday food art, I will subconsciously smile throughout the process and from that moment I realise you can get happiness from your daily life by creating it yourself."

It's a message that she feels strongly about as she emphasises in conclusion: "Don't always hope for others to bring you happiness. You are the one who can create happiness to you and people around you."

Follow Michelle Lim on her Instagram: [foodskunkfun](#)