

# Press Release



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## Plastic's forever appeal

Women (and increasingly, men) continue to be smitten by the revolutionary plastic containers created by American Earl Tupper in 1946.

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**S**HIREEN Devan is fiercely proud of the 131 pieces of Tupperware she has amassed over the years. She knows exactly how many pieces she has because she not only catalogues them but has them committed to memory.

"I used to own 133 pieces actually," she shares. "But I lent two to a friend a while ago and tragically, she forgot to return them. She has since migrated to Australia. I assume with my Tupperwares!"

"I am very upset. Those were vintage pieces I bought on e-bay," says Shireen, 36, who is known among her friends as the "Tupperware lady".

"I know better now. I never lend people my Tupperware. Never," says the mother of two from Kuantan who now resides in Singapore with her entire collection of plastic containers.

Extreme? Tupperware fans wouldn't think so.

Public relations consultant Yeoh Tjean Nee says her kitchen is stocked with Tupperware as well as generic plastic containers – the latter she keeps for the sole purpose of packing food to give away to friends and family.

"I am very reluctant to part with my

Tupperwares," says the 42-year-old whose collection also exceeds 100 pieces. "They are precious to me and I don't really want to hand people over my Tupperware. It's easier to just keep them with me."

For non-fans, Tupperware equals any plastic container for food. In fact, most Malaysians refer to all plastic containers as Tupperware, just like how we call all instant noodles Maggi Mee and every chocolate drink, Milo. Tupperware is one of these brands that have become generic.

Plastic containers are so ubiquitous these days it's hard to imagine they were considered revolutionary when Tupperware made its debut in 1946.

Before that, people used to store food in glass containers and crockery, and covered them with cloth or wax paper. When Tupperware made its debut in 1946, it offered consumers an easy alternative to the traditional glass food containers and crockery which were used to store food. Tupperware containers were light and not likely to break. Furthermore, they came with air-tight lids which kept food fresh for longer. Early Tupperware containers were made of white see-through plastic but soon, pastel colours were introduced and so began the aesthetic as well as functional appeal of the products.

Malaysians were first introduced to Tupperware in 1964. Its products were in a higher price range, but women would save to buy them for their families. They were not



The appeal of Tupperware is as strong now as it was in the 1950s when the original Tupperware lady Brownie Wise introduced the concept of Tupperware parties. — Photo courtesy of the Smithsonian Archives Center, National Museum of American History.

only buying into Tupperware's functionality or lifetime warranty, but also the affirmation of a middle-class lifestyle. Like Pyrex pots and crockery which housewives displayed in showcases, Tupperware containers were a representation of growing affluence and well-being.

These days, Tupperwares are still relatively expensive than generic household containers. For some time, people seemed more drawn to the convenience of disposable plastic wares. But growing eco-consciousness has led more people to start using reusable containers again. Tupperware's recent Hari Raya promotion was an encouraging people to bring their own containers to pack home food from the Pasar Ramadan.

For many Malaysians, Tupperware containers were just one of those things they grew up with.

Shireen's love affair with the American-made plastic containers began when she was in her late teens.

"I developed an interest in cooking after my SPM examination. I'd hang around my grandmother in the kitchen, bugging her to teach me to make all her signature dishes – she makes really great curries and her Chicken Kurma was out of this world."

"As her apprentice, I began to notice all the pretty containers she kept in her cupboards. I was particularly taken by a set of plastic bowls with lids that were in pretty, pastel shades of yellow, green and pink. They were really beautiful and I used to open the cupboards a few times a day just to sneak a peek at them," she recalls, adding that she has since inherited most of her grandmother's and also her mother's collections while continuing to buy new Tupperware products.

For Yeoh, collecting Tupperware began as a necessity. As a university student living on her own for the first time, she realised she needed durable containers to store her food stuff.

Having grown up with Tupperware – "my school lunch box was a square Tupperware and my water was in a Tupperware tumbler" – it was only natural to bring a set with her.

"As a student, space was scarce. I didn't have a fridge in my room and I needed to store my food, as efficiently as I could. They were great as they stacked so well and didn't take up much space. When I started working and got my own place, I finally had space and cabinets and a fridge. That's when I started building my collection. They fit so nicely in my cabinets and my fridge," gushes Yeoh, 42, admitting that her mother and aunt worry that she might be obsessed with the product.

Yeoh says she likes Tupperware's lifetime warranty, and insists her containers will last through generations.

"I replaced the lids of a couple of my grandmother's tumblers because they had cracked a little – this is after 40 years or so of usage – and now they're as good as new again," she says.

It would seem that Shireen and Yeoh are in good company.

With over 100 markets around the world, Tupper's plastic containers are still enjoying the popularity they did back in the 1950s.

In Malaysia, the company boasts double-digit growth figures annually which indicate that consumers here love their plastic containers.

Tupperware has expanded its product base, from storage containers to cooking utensils and even personal care products.

But it is still the vision of properly stacked containers in kitchen cabinets, refrigerators and freezer that remains Tupperware's enduring appeal.

One reason for its sustained popularity, explains Tupperware Malaysia's managing director Tham Ying Hoong, is the company's focus on innovation.

"The company invests in research and development. Our marketing teams all over the world look at what is needed in the home and what is available. They then present their findings and pitch ideas for solutions that Tupperware can develop," explains Ying who has also taken to collecting Tupperware during her 20 years of working with the company.



Yeoh Tjean Nee loves Tupperware's lifetime warranty.



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# Press Release



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## Powered by women

Tupperware parties are not just social gatherings, but an opportunity for women to network and do business.

IT'S HARD to imagine but Tupperware was created out of a waste product of the oil refining product called polyethylene slag. It was a slimy, black material, often collected from the bottom of oil barrels.

More than 60 years ago, tree-surgeon Earl Tupper experimented with the material. He managed to purify this unappealing material and turned it into mouldable see-through plastic which was not just durable but could retain its shape if twisted and bent.

The "miracle" plastic was moulded into bowls which were later known as the "Wonderlier bowls" and tumblers (the famous Bell Tumblers) and became among the first Tupperware products to take over American kitchens in the late 1950s and 1960s.

The idea of a plastic container that was durable and could keep food fresh was revolutionary. At the time, food that was stored in the fridge for freshness was wrapped in cloth, wax paper or foil and their life span was, naturally, short. Glass containers and crockery were expensive and breakable.

While Tupper's creations were radical, they didn't sell in retail stores as people were sceptical about using plastics.

However, there was one woman who saw the potential in the product and took it upon herself to sell them. Brownie Wise was given a set of Wonderlier bowls by a friend and she loved them so much, she persuaded her friends and their friends to buy them too. She'd organise parties and share the wonders of the bowls and get other women excited. She then sold the products to them.

When word got around about her "marketing strategy" – at one stage she reportedly sold US\$150,000 worth of products in a year – Tupper contacted her and soon after, offered her a top position in his company.

The rest, as they say, is history. Wise's "Tupperware Parties" caught on like wild fire and till today, are the only way to buy and sell Tupperware products. She also introduced the "party plan" which is the direct selling plan that enabled many American women to earn a substantial income.

Tupperware parties weren't merely a social gathering for women with a common love for the products. And they weren't just an opportunity for the brand's consultants to sell their products. The parties offered women who, either because of social, educational or economical circumstances could not go out to work, a chance to earn an income or build a career. How much they earned was based entirely on how much work they put into their Tupperware business.



Tupperware Malaysia MD, Tham Ying Hoong, says her mother, a traditional cook who believed in only using fresh ingredients, has become a fan of Tupperware too.



Wan Lye Duan (centre) worked hard so that her Tupperware business could help her family recover from financial trouble during the 1997 economic slowdown.

Tupperware parties were and still are the only way to buy the plastic containers.

In Malaysia, Tupperware parties take many forms. In homes, Tupperware consultants (often dubbed Tupperware ladies) show a group of women how they can organise their kitchens or demonstrate kitchen solutions.

The majority of Tupperware's 2.6 million sales force are women. Though the number of men in the company has grown, it is primarily a company of women entrepreneurs.

During Tupperware's early years in the late 1940s and 1950s, women were suffering the effects of post World War II. Men were returning from war and taking over the factory jobs that were previously held by women. Tupperware and its business plan provided these women an opportunity to maintain their roles as householders while not losing out on earning independently.

And though circumstances have changed, Tupperware's direct selling plan continues to provide opportunities for women, says Tupperware Malaysia managing director Tham Ying Hoong.

"When Tupperware started off, it was about empowerment. Now, it's not just that. It is almost impossible for households to survive on a single income. Tupperware provides an opportunity for women to supplement their family income while still raising their children and managing their households," says Tham.

Former teacher Wan Lye Duan says her Tupperware business helped lift her out of the financial quagmire she and her family were in during the 1997 economic downturn.

"My husband was a petroleum engineer and we had quite a good family income. But things changed drastically in 1997 with the economic slowdown. We practically lost everything in the share market. All of a sudden we lost our financial security. I pushed myself to think about my own financial situation. Was I going to remain a teacher? I was 35 and I knew the most I would earn, even after full service, would be about RM7,000. Would that be enough for me to support my three children? I began looking at other options," shares Wan.

At that point, she'd never heard of Tupperware.

"One day my husband was invited to a house warming party. As a gift, he was given a set of Tupperware tumblers by the hostess. The

minute I laid eyes on the tumblers, I got excited. I'd never seen anything like it. The next day, I contacted the hostess of the party and asked her more about the tumblers," she recalls. As she learnt about the products and the business plan, Wan became certain that she'd found her way out of her slump.

"I knew it was something for me. Plus, I did my research and I knew the company had been around for a long time. I attended a training session and signed on as a consultant. I decided to quit teaching and focus all my attention on developing this business," she explains.

Her family thought she was crazy. They were astonished at her decision to leave a career in teaching to sell plastic containers.

"Everyone was against it. They thought it was beneath me to go into sales. My husband tried every way to stop me from pursuing this business. He forbade me from talking about the products to any of our family and said that he expected me to carry out all my duties as a mother, daughter-in-law and wife despite my business,"

she says. It was tough but Wan persevered and within two years, she managed to build a successful business with a centre to call her own.

Seeing her success, Wan's husband decided to join her in her business, as did many of her family members. It seemed like a second lease of life for the couple – business was booming and Wan discovered she was expecting their fourth child.

Unfortunately, fate dealt her another blow – in her sixth month of pregnancy, her husband was diagnosed with cancer and he passed away a month later. "I felt like the carpet was pulled from under me. It was a very dark period in my life... the biggest challenge I faced."

As a single mother, Wan is grateful for the decision she made many years ago to begin her own Tupperware business.

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