

COVID-19 SPECIAL

Where has all the flour gone? Shops struggle to restock fast enough amid circuit breaker baking frenzy



Long queues at the Phoon Huat store in Toa Payoh on May 14, 2020. ST PHOTO: KUA CHEE SIONG

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A handwritten piece of paper, stuck on a box outside baking supplies store Phoon Huat in Toa Payoh, states that ingredients such as baking powder, baking soda and cocoa powder are out of stock.

The same ingredients are missing from many shelves in supermarkets and grocery stores across the island. Shops and retailers, however, insist there is sufficient stock.

The only problem: They cannot replenish shelves fast enough because of a baking frenzy brought on by the circuit breaker measures and Hari Raya Aidilfitri, which falls on May 24.

Meanwhile, at Phoon Huat in Toa Payoh, customers wait in line, getting their temperatures and identity cards checked before entering.

This is a typical scene at shops run by the Phoon Huat chain, which also owns the Redman by Phoon Huat outlets. As part of social distancing and contact tracing efforts, all 14 outlets have in place a queue management system and digital check-in system, SafeEntry.

The queue system requires an individual to give his or her mobile number to get a queue number via SMS stating the waiting time. Upon receiving a second SMS, customers can join a shorter queue to enter the shop.

But check the date before heading to a store. Entry is restricted by the last digit of one's NRIC number. For instance, if it is an odd number, an individual will be allowed entry only on odd-numbered dates.

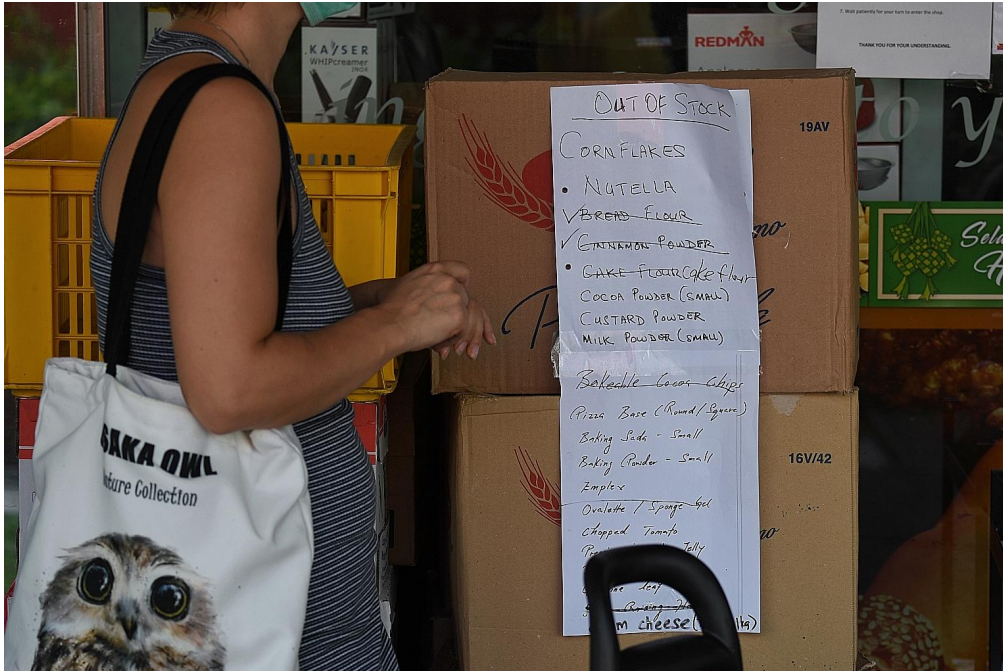
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Since April 27, the stores have also had shorter daily operating hours of 10am to 7pm - regular operating hours vary across outlets - due to manpower constraints arising from split-team operations.

A Phoon Huat spokesman says: "We found the alternate visit dates effective for social distancing. The objective is to cut the number of customers by half.



Long queues at the Phoon Huat store in Toa Payoh on May 14. With more customers stocking up on baking supplies, the shop has run out of some ingredients. ST PHOTO: KUA CHEE SIONG

"Our shops are small and with the limited (number of customers) allowed in each shop at any one time, we want to cut the queue and crowd (numbers) outside."

Still, the measures have not stopped some of the stores' baking ingredients from running out fast.

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> With more time on their hands, more people are turning to baking - from homemade bread to the trendy Basque burnt cheesecake - during the circuit breaker period.

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> Says the Phoon Huat spokesman: "We are unable to replenish stocks fast enough for retail customers. Whatever retail packs are produced daily are immediately sent to our shops twice a day.

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> "For basic baking ingredients like flour and sugar, the supply is enough. It is the retail packing process we are trying our best to increase capacity for."

Phoon Huat's production plant runs three daily shifts and it is looking to increase delivery slots with third-party logistics

companies.

Supermarket chains are also racing to restock baking goods, for which there has been unprecedented demand.

At FairPrice outlets, sales of baking products "have increased about threefold" during the circuit breaker period compared with the same period last year, says a FairPrice spokesman. Sales have also jumped by 80 per cent in the weeks leading up to Hari Raya Aidilfitri, compared with the same period last year.

"This has resulted in periodic disruption for some of these products such as flour, baking soda and instant yeast," adds the FairPrice spokesman. "We have ramped up supplies and are purchasing from a wider pool of suppliers to provide more alternatives."

Since the tighter circuit breaker measures were announced on April 21, grocery store The Source Bulk Foods has been selling 25kg of flour daily - five times the usual amount - and seen more demand for vanilla pods.

Home bakers who are unable to get sufficient baking supplies have had to make do with ingredients they already have.

Housewife Patricia Tan, 52, who bakes for family and friends, looked in vain for Philadelphia cream cheese for weeks and was unable to fulfil an order for a birthday cake.

She says: "I did not want to use other brands because I cannot guarantee the quality."

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The avid baker of sourdough bread has been hunting for flour at different supermarkets and baking supplies stores, and has tried using flour from Vietnam which she bought at a FairPrice supermarket.

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She says: "I don't need yeast because I have a sourdough starter, but I can't do without flour. And for bread, you usually need bread flour that has high protein content."

Cream cheese, baking chocolate and chiffon cake tins were missing from Mrs Michelle Wong's delivery from Phoon Huat's Redman online shop last Friday.

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Only seven of her 15 items arrived. She was informed via e-mail that the rest were out of stock and she would receive a refund.

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The mother of two children, aged eight and 11, ordered online as she did not want to leave them at home to go to the supermarket, especially since she would likely have had to stay in the queue for a while.

She says: "I will just have to make do with whatever I have."

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