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Gig Economy: Encountering drama and queue experts in the line for baking supplies



John Lui taking down details of a customer at Redman at Heartbeat@Bedok. ST PHOTO: NG SOR LUAN

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SINGAPORE - You meet the most interesting people waiting in line for baking goods.

There is Ms Do You Hear The People Sing. Ejected after she was caught sneaking in line without a queue number, she delivers a two-minute speech audible to everyone in the line - and, I think, to people in the next building - about how our system had failed her and everyone in it. She exits, stage left.

Under social distancing rules, only ten persons are allowed in the store and another ten in the queue. The rest have to wait for a text message allowing them into the line. It is a decently long wait. People get upset. They cheat. They are ready to revolt.

After a short intermission, Ms Sing is back for part deux. In my head, she is Jean Valjean from Les Misérables: She wanted bread, but found injustice. She makes another rousing call to arms, but I guess no one feels like joining her at the barricades, so she leaves.

It has been extraordinarily busy at all RedMan and Phoon Huat baking product stores during the circuit breaker period. Stuck at home, visions of homemade rustic loaves and brioches danced in everyone's heads. Mine included. Two weeks ago, I baked bread for the first time in a decade. And I absolutely did take and share pictures of it. I'm not a psychopath.

My heart sinks when Ms Sing appears a third time, here on a Saturday morning at the RedMan store at Heartbeat@Bedok where I am helping to control traffic.

With theatrically deep regret, she informs me - and everyone within a 10m radius - to delete her name from the waitlist because she could no longer tolerate the mistreatment of honest citizens. I write her wish on a sheet of paper, using slightly larger arm movements so people in the back can see.

She finishes singing the song of angry men and leaves. For the last time, I hope. I am not sure I can take another rendition. Just my luck, Mr Zero Stars For You takes over. He has deliberately parked himself within earshot of me.

He is the Asian Parent of grumblers. He doesn't shout. He is not angry, just disappointed. He quietly lists the areas where I have been found wanting as an employee and as a human being.

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"Alamak. Look at that woman in there, taking her sweet time. No shopping list, just walking rooound and rooound," he says, stretching the "round" in a singsong way that implies that she is lingering on purpose just to annoy him.

"You should chase her out. But you don't want to. That's your problem. Are you sure there are 10 people inside? I see eight. Did you check? Don't you want to count?" he goes on.

I get an hour of this. He is my impostor syndrome given a voice. He is my anxiety internal monologue. Just before I reach the depths of despair, his number is called and he leaves to join the physical queue. Tonight I will dream of being called to the principal's office.

Here at the RedMan store, there is a fairly simple queue system in place. Leave your mobile number, then wait for the text that tells you to join the line.

As luck would have it, Mr Zero Stars For You is only one of several queue-system scientists in line today. What are the odds that such a collection of experts would be in the same place at the same time?

They catch my eye and shake their heads and go tsk tsk, then tell me gravely that if their expertise had been sought before all this, there would be no waiting at all. Plus, world hunger will be abolished and all single persons will find true love.

The store opens at 10am but when I show up at 8.30am, staff are already there, tidying and restocking. Fresh stock arrives from the warehouse. There are cheeses and milk to be put away. And almonds.



John Lui puts on gloves before entering a fridge to replenish stocks at Redman at Heartbeat@Bedok. ST PHOTO: NG SOR LUAN

Bakers, we need to talk about this almond business. I can handle sorting the packs by weight. But almonds come in blanched and unblanched, varied by whether they are whole, diced, sliced and, if I remember, sub-categorised into unmassaged or massaged, then further sorted by Swedish, Shiatsu and Thai. Why? What

unholy compendium of recipes are you using that is causing me to stare at a shelf for minutes wondering where a pack should go?

Anyway, I have to look the part of a RedMan employee and it fools some people. A customer shows me a sheet with "feuilletine" on it. I'm busy with almonds so I want to tell him, "sorry, she doesn't work here any more," but I think better of it so I ask my trainer for the day, the very patient and sweet Ms Lody Austria, the store supervisor.

As it turns out, feuilletine is a baking, er, thingy. Throughout the day, Ms Austria, an avid baker herself, as employees here tend to be, is not only a guide but also a dispenser of baking advice - yeast can be used past its expiration date if frozen, so no worries buying the bulk pack if you can't get a small package. Milk with a few drops of lemon juice is a substitute for buttermilk, for example.

I head home just after lunch. I am happy for the experience because after working from home for the last three months, I miss being around people. Checking my smart watch's health app, I see my resting heart rate has gone up, from its usual 70 beats per minute to 90.

Being around people is great, but being around Singaporeans in a queue? I like helping people, but I don't think my heart can handle the drama.

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