From making bentos to writing her own cookbooks, littlemissbento is making big waves in the culinary scene.

For most people, a takeaway meal is simply a container full of food put together quickly. But to Ms Shirley Wong, the empty lunch box is a canvas for assembling edible art. In the hands of this food artist, blogger and recipe book author, even the simplest ingredients give rise to visual masterpieces.

Better known as littlemissbento in online circles, Ms Wong painstakingly crafts each of her bento boxes, introducing *kawaii* (cute) elements such as cartoon characters into her dishes. She also bakes breads and tarts with same level of attention to presentation.

Her meticulous approach to cooking and the beauty of her creations have won the hearts of fans worldwide. She has more than 300,000 followers on social media and has even published five cookbooks.

In this interview with *NTULink Magazine*, Ms Wong shares with us what inspired her to start making bentos and how her hobby has evolved over the years.

What motivated you to start making bentos?

I started packing my own lunches to work because my office was in a really secluded location. There was no canteen, and the hawker centre was a 15-minute walk away. I didn’t like walking in the sun in my office wear, so I decided that I would cook instead. That was when my bento-making hobby took off.

Since I was putting so much effort into my bentos, I thought: why not make cute ones, like those made by Japanese housewives? So I began to experiment. My first creation was a rabbit, and I think I used corn as the bunny’s mouth. It looked horrible! But still, I was really proud of it.

Where did you learn your craft?

I would say part of it is self-taught—I got better with practice. I also read books about Japanese cuisine and bento cookbooks written by Japanese authors. Then, as I became more serious about making bentos, I made trips to Tokyo to get certified—I’m the first in Singapore to be certified under the Japan Sushi Instructor Association (for sushi making) and the Japan Salonaise Association (for baking). The sushi course took me about a year to complete, while the other took just a couple of months.

What were the challenges you faced along the way?

One challenge was understanding how social media works. I had to find the right channels and learn how to use them properly.

I also took a while to find my style as a food artist and influencer. If you view my Instagram feed now, you can tell there’s a certain look and feel to it. The clean and white style is something that I am comfortable with, but at the same time brings out the appeal of the food that I’m showcasing.

Another challenge is experimenting with my recipes. People don’t see the things I’ve thrown away, or those that I don’t photograph because I found them too ugly. There’s a lot of work that goes on behind the scenes.

What is it like turning your hobby into a full-time career?

I started doing this full-time since March 2017, so it’s been almost a year. What I’ve learnt is that I need to be discerning when it comes to projects. If I’m doing something that I don’t genuinely believe in, it shows, and my long-time followers would probably know.

I now have an agent managing some of these projects, which frees me up to do the creative work that I love. Overall, everything seems to have fallen into place quite nicely.

You’ve also published some recipe books of your own. Can you tell us more about them?

Since 2013, I’ve published five cookbooks. I like sharing, and cookbooks were a way to teach people. They’re also a really good way to brand myself and let people outside the region know about me and my work.

The average cookbook takes about six months to produce. I have to write, test and plan the content,
You must feel like a star!

I get recognised by people sometimes, so I am a bit more conscious in public nowadays. A couple of times I was also recognised on the plane. And when I was in Japan, someone recognised me in a café and tried to take photos of me secretly. It was quite funny!

But other than that, I’m still just me—my friends still know me as ‘the noisy one’.

What advice do you have for NTU alumni who may want to turn their passion into a profession?

You have to find something that you will enjoy doing for a long time. You should also craft a niche for yourself—something that belongs to you, or create a style that is uniquely you—so when people see it, they know it’s yours.

Lifehacks for making bento

1. No need to spend big bucks on tools!
   All you really need are:
   - A good bento box
   - Vegetable cutters
   - Small scissors
   - Punchers
   - Tweezers
   - Decorative food picks
   - Cling wrap

2. Cook something that you like
   It’s important to make food that you and your loved ones enjoy!

3. Think about whether you need to reheat the food
   This will influence the recipes and cooking methods you choose.

4. Plan your recipe
   List down the ingredients, cooking methods and utensils required.

5. Sketch your idea
   This helps you visualise what the bento will eventually look like.

6. Pay attention to colours!
   Here are some suggestions:
   - Green
     Leafy vegetables, matcha, kiwi, beans, seaweed
   - Pink
     Fish floss, salmon
   - Beige
     Mincemeat, bonito flakes, sauces, sesame
   - Black
     Black sesame
   - Purple
     Purple carrots, purple cabbage, purple sweet potatoes
   - Red
     Tomatoes, strawberries, bell peppers
   - Blue
     Blue pea flowers
   - Yellow
     Tumors, egg, pumpkin, yellow tomatoes

7. Decorate your dish
   To make your bento more outstanding, include tiny details and flourishes using small vegetable cuttings and decorative food picks.

Follow Shirley’s work on Instagram at @littlemissbento