



Yeo Min is the author of *Chinese Pastry School* (Marshall Cavendish Cuisine, 2024), founder of Pastories Bakery (<https://www.thepastories.com/>) and co-founder of the Museum of Food (<https://www.foodmuseumsg.com/>), a nonprofit for heritage food education.

Jimmy

Tell us about the book *Chinese Pastry School*. It has more than 200 pages, and you didn't just write and do the research. You also took the photographs, and the photographs are amazing. You're very talented. Why did you put the book together?

Yeo Min

So I was in pastry school at the time [in the early 2020s]. I quit my job. I want[ed] to be a pastry chef because then I [could] do creative work, maybe earn more money. I was wrong about the second part. So I was there for the Western French skills. Then I met my teacher, my mentor, Chef Pang [Nyuk Yoon]. She's in her 70s. She's this amazing chef, and she had so much to share. She taught one or two classes on traditional pastry. But she also shared that they had been cutting back on the curriculum quite a bit, and it's always the traditional stuff that gets cut.

Jimmy

Because there's no market for it?

Yeo Min

Yeah. You graduate with a diploma in pastry, you [will] most likely go work in a five-star hotel or a Michelin-star kitchen. Very few graduates would go to traditional bakeries.

Jimmy

Kueh also?

Yeo Min

We didn't learn *ang ku kueh* [a pastry made from glutinous rice flour typically filled with mung bean paste]. We learned how to make mooncakes. And I asked, "Why are we not learning how to cook the paste from scratch?" And she said, "You can just buy it outside." It pained her to say that too. So she talked me through the steps, and I was very inspired. Then many traditional pastry shops closed down. So that was around the time that the Hokkien bakery Tan Hock Seng announced their closure.



(Facing page) Yeo Min and her mentor Chef Pang Nyuk Yoon, 2025. Photo by Woo Pei Qi.

(Above) Suzhou-style mooncakes shaped into domes by hand instead of being pressed into mooncake moulds, 2024. Photo by Yeo Min.

Jimmy

Where were they located? And what were they known for?

Yeo Min

Somewhere in Chinatown. They were known for their *beh teh saw* [a flaky pastry filled with maltose], made fresh. I was quite shocked. I thought, "Why am I not doing anything about this? And why is nothing being done about this?" So, as always, I took matters into my own hands because what am I supposed to do, right? I see a problem; I can't just wait around. That's not really my style. So I was like, "What actually is failing here? Why is this happening?"

And I realised that the French are so successful because they are so open with sharing their recipes. They have schools all over the world. They share their techniques everywhere. But at the same time, Chinese people being Chinese people, or Asian people being Asian people, we are like, "*Aiya, paiseh, paiseh lah*" ["Oh dear, I'm so embarrassed."]. This is a very humble technique. I'm not going to force my children to take on this business.

Jimmy

I think you can't force them because they don't want to learn.

Yeo Min

Yeah. And there's this idea of the hardworking Asian. If you want to learn my craft, you commit your whole life to me. There's no such thing as a six-month internship.

Jimmy

You have to come in and scrub the dishes.

Yeo Min

Yes. You have to start by throwing the trash, and you work your way up. I respect that these chefs spend their entire lives building an empire, their business, all these recipes. So I respect that, but that is a sure way for our practices to die, for these techniques to just disappear. And I was like, "Okay, if I can learn all these basic French techniques in 18 months, including a six-month internship... so actually 12 months was all it took to cover all the basic techniques, everything from sugar to chocolate sculpting, to plated desserts, gelato, croissants." So I was like, "Can I do the same for Chinese pastries? Is there a way that I can maybe consolidate all these techniques, translate it to an accessible language?"

Jimmy

Is there a place out there that teaches all these things?

Yeo Min

There isn't a single place because Chinese pastry is very diverse. Everything is divided by region.

Jimmy

It's very complicated.

Yeo Min

It's very complicated. But if you think about it, the French went through the same thing. Certain pastries belong to certain regions, and then they became a huge thing, and then everyone now eats them. I guess there's a bit of knowledge lost, like which part of France this came from. But at the same time, there are so many people making these now, and we are forced to study a bit of the history in pastry school. So I thought maybe I can do the same, but I can't set up a school 'cause I have no funding.

Jimmy

Hence the name of the book.

Published by Marshall Cavendish Cuisine, 2024. Collection of the National Library Singapore (Call no. 641.865 YEO-[COO]).



This is an edited extract of the full interview. Scan the QR code to listen to the full episode on *BiblioAsia Podcast*, "A Woman's Mission to Revive Traditional Chinese Candy".

Check out the book, *Chinese Pastry School* (Call no. 641.865 YEO-[COO]).

