



The HD40 Food House coffee shop in Holland Drive has rattan-weave lamp shades, warm lighting, marble top tables and wooden chairs.

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Kopitiam go posh

Coffee shops are upgrading to stylish interiors and cashless payment to compete

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A coffee shop in Block 40 Holland Drive is turning heads and drawing diners with its stylish interior. It boasts ambient lighting, marble-top tables and mock rose-wood wooden chairs, a sharp change from the fluorescent glare and plastic furniture at most coffee shops.

It represents a new breed of coffee shops being rolled out to compete in a burgeoning food industry and rival their nearest competitor, food courts.

No fewer than five coffee shop operators are overhauling their image and offering frills such as wireless networks and cashless payment.

Unlike food courts, which are air-conditioned and comfortably nestled within malls, coffee shops are typically non-air-conditioned eating houses tucked in blocks of flats or shophouses. They also tend to be smaller than food courts and boast fewer stalls.

There is no data on the number of coffee shops but figures from the Department of Statistics show that the combined number of cafes, coffee houses, snack bars, food courts, coffee shops and eating houses increased from 3,710 in 2008 to 3,897 last year.

Also upping the ante is PappaRich, a modern coffee shop chain from Malaysia which opened in March in River Valley Road.

It transformed a previously rundown coffee shop into a cosy outlet with wood-paneled

walls, open air-conditioning and free wireless service.

Its business development director for Singapore, Ms Karen Low, who is in her 40s, said: "Times have changed and people are looking for cleaner coffee shops with better ambience where they can relax for a meal."

"And when diners linger, they are likely to spend more."

The chain, which specialises in hawker favourites such as Ipoh kway teow (flat rice noodles) and nasi lemak, was launched in Malaysia in 2007 and was an instant hit, spawning 35 outlets.

Indeed, a successful makeover can change diners' perceptions of a former dowdy eating spot and boost business.

Mr Yap Kim Leong, 42, operations manager of coffee shop chain operator Chang Cheng Mee Wah, said business at its Holland Drive outlet grew by 10 per cent after its \$300,000 makeover last June.

The image overhaul is being gradually implemented across its 23 outlets, the most recent one being its coffee shop in Queen Street.

Also sporting a cosy vibe is the two-year-old Bar Bar Black Sheep coffee shop in Bukit Timah Road.

Its owner, Mr Bernard Ng, 39, who used to market online websites, said: "I'd always wondered why coffee shops have to be stuck in a mould and why customers have to be forced to sit on plastic chairs and eat off plastic tables."

He spent about \$120,000 renovating the former traditional coffee shop into one with a rustic vibe and furnished with wooden furniture.

Food court chain operator Kopitiam, which also owns 38 coffee shops, upgraded the payment system at its coffee shops last year.

Diners have the option of using the Kopitiam cash card – which offers a 10 per cent discount – to make payment at its drinks and dessert stalls.

The cash card was first introduced in its food courts in 2004 and it cost \$200,000 to upgrade the sales systems at its coffee shops.

Kopitiam's corporate communications manager, Ms Goh Wee Ling, 36, said the move to make the coffee shops more like its food courts will not cannibalise its food court business.

"Both models exist to satisfy the needs of different groups of customers. Coffee shops cater to residents who want a quick meal while food courts target shoppers in a mall," she said.

Similarly, food court chain operator Koufu, which owns eight coffee shops under the VarINice brand, is also rolling out cashless payment and wireless services at its coffee shops this year. Such facilities are already available at its food courts.

Koufu's chief development officer, Mr Marc Jeei, 50, said its coffee shops are playing catch-up with the facilities at its food courts because the infrastructure in a mall makes it easier to implement technological systems.

He added that its chain of coffee shops is also working to upgrade its restrooms to enhance the "overall dining experience". Its coffee shop in Ang Mo Kio Avenue 10, for example, has received a four-star rating from the Restroom Association here for its "excellent" level of cleanliness.

And customers are giving the changes a thumbs up.

Administrative executive Helen Cheong, 60, said of the coffee shop in Holland Drive: "It does not look like a coffee shop at all. The decor is nice and it has great ambience, which makes dining here very comfortable."

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Besides a nice decor, PappaRich also boasts open air-conditioning and free wireless service.

