Now who's the toast of the town?

Two newcomers aim for a slice of the kaya toast market. Sarah Ng reports

THE kaya toast war is heating up. Two newcomers are offering cheaper prices for the bread and brew that Ya Kun and Killiney Kopitiam have popularised here.

But the likeness does not stop at the thin, brown-bread wafers with kaya and butter. Even the marble-topped tables with wooden stools and old-style coffee cups with green flower motifs have been follow ed to a T.

Wang Jiao's owner Cindy Lim has a pat explanation for it. "The similarities arise because of our similar roots," said the 27-year-old who quit her sales job at American Express to start the business in 2002.

They are typical in the early Hainanese coffee shops that she said her Hainanese father and great-grandfather used to run.

Ms Lim's first outlet is in Market Street where her Wang Jiao House of Kaya Toast sells the standard two slices of kaya toast for $1.40.

It is 20 cents less than that of old-timer Ya Kun but no different from Killiney Kopitiam's thick, white-bread version.

However, if you want the set meal (two half-boiled eggs, two pieces of kaya toast and a cup of coffee), the difference is quite striking. Ya Kun charges $3.70 against Wang Jiao's $3.20.

The prices are even better at the newest kid on the coffee block: Ah Mei. Its stall in Clifford Centre's foodcourt charges $1.20 for kaya toast and $2 for the set meal.

Next month, Ah Mei will open at Paragon shopping mall with the same marbled-topped tables and wooden stools. By then, Singaporeans will have about 40 kaya toast outlets to choose from.

But Ya Kun dominates with 17 outlets, including its franchisees.

With food fads such as bubble tea and Portuguese egg tarts coming and going, the inevitable question is whether these players will end up toast.

No way, they insist. Ya Kun's Adrian Loi, 51, whose Hainanese father founded the chain in 1944, is confident because "bread, eggs and coffee are our staples for breakfast."

Demonstrating her confidence, Wang Jiao's Ms Lim is adding a sixth shop by the end of this month, in Changi Airport Terminal 2.

Ah Mei's owner, Mr Alan Lee, plans to open 10 shops in the next 12 months. Mr Lee, 55, started Singapore's first halal foodcourt in 1999 and opened Ah Mei only this January.

Like Wang Jiao's Ms Lim, Mr Lee, a Hokkien, who also runs the 17 Banquet foodcourts, maintains he is no copycat. "Our kaya is based on my mother's Peranakan recipe, which we further improved in six months of research," he said.

Ms Lim said her business model is contemporary. Apart from the Market Street outlet, her other shops are done up in bright colours and have pop music playing in the background. And she plans to introduce chocolate kaya.

Veteran Ya Kun's Mr Loi is unperturbed. His business has not been affected, he said. "Some of my customers went over to the competitors because of novelty, but they came back. They are the best judges," he added.

It will open two more outlets and have another franchise by this year's end.

Killiney Kopitiam believes variety is the spice of life. It is also owned by a Hainanese but Mr Woon Tek Seng, 57, has expanded the menu to include other local favourites like mee siam and curry chicken.

The chain, with 15 shops, offers 30 dishes.

Said Mr Woon: "People don't eat kaya toast the whole day. Often, people order toast after their main meal here."

To be the toast of the town, Dr Terence Fan of Singapore Management University believes: "The one with the total package of quality, variety, innovation and ambience will stand out."