Three students and their bar

JANICE HENG finds out how they develop their brainchild into a cozy hangout for their fellow students.

University students are more likely to be found hanging out in bars than running them. But Shermeen Tan, Shalini Arul, and Nabilah Said are, at 21, already managers of their own bar — and one on campus, at that.

Their brainchild is Frujch, a stylish, entirely student-run bar located in the basement of Singapore Management University’s (SMU) School of Information Systems.

Frujch serves a wide range of beer, wine, and hard liquor — with non-alcoholic smoothies that even teetotallers can enjoy. The bar has recently introduced food as well, including waffles, salads and mini bagels, on the menu.

In addition to bar-organised programmes, such as a recent drinking game competition, Frujch plays host to events such as birthday parties.

BT spoke with Shermeen and Shalini, who are both marketing and corporate communications students from SMU’s School of Business. Nabilah, accounting student and Frujch’s director of finance, was out on an internship at the time.

Everything began last March, when the school’s Office of Student Life held a tender for a fruit juice stall. Somewhere along the way, and after rounds of presentations, Frujch won the tender — and the idea of a fruit juice stall had morphed into that of a bar.

It was never just about the alcohol, said Shermeen. SMU’s new campus felt more corporate than the old Bukit Timah one, she explained, and their aim was to create a cozy place “where people could just hang out”. To that end, the bar is furnished with inviting sofas, and often features live student bands.

And besides — “If you are a business student, obviously you’d want to own your own business,” Shermeen said.

Being students in a business school has helped, said Shalini. “You have the theories behind, in your mind, and now you get to put them into practice.” She added that expertise was also within easy reach: “The professors are also our friends.”

Still, running their own business has not been easy. Not only did they have to fund the entire venture themselves, they also had to start from scratch in mid-July, when the tender was awarded.

Since the bar was to open at the start of the September school term, that gave them only two and a half months to get everything together, from obtaining appliances to decorating and furnishing their bar.

“We didn’t know anything at all,” Shermeen said with a laugh. This was the first business venture for all three girls. They found themselves asking nearby pubs about blender suppliers, and even found their ham supplier at a wedding.

One breakthrough came when they hit upon Sia Huat, a supplier in Chinatown known to insidors of the food and beverage industry.

Shermeen had this word of encouragement for potential entrepreneurs: “Asking will get you everywhere; you’ll be surprised at the amount of people willing to help.”

The bar held its grand opening on Jan 9, after four months of operations. They also started hiring part-timers that week; prior to that, their only employee had been Shermeen’s sister, a hospitality graduate.

The three partners all help out at Frujch whenever they can. “There’s been a lot of sacrifice on our part,” said Shalini: the bar opens from 10am to 10pm from Monday to Thursday, and till midnight on Fridays.

Their fourth partner — who had initially proposed the idea — had to pull out, due to school commitments.

Nonetheless, the experience has been a worthwhile one. “At the end of the day, you end up learning a lot of things,” said Shalini. One of those things, she and Shermeen agree, is that they have proved capable of much more than they have ever expected.

“Nothing is impossible,” Shalini added. A sentiment well worth raising one’s glass to.