Bubble tea fad makes comeback

Ten years since bubble tea became one of the biggest drink fads to hit Singapore, and more than five years after its bubble burst, the curious concoction is back. Seizing queues and 45-minute waiting times have become regular fixtures at the outlets of at least two popular chains.

Never mind that prices of the drinks – concoctions of flavoured syrup, tea and tapioca balls – have soared to as much as $6 a pop, fans say the improved variety built from people who tried our product and genuinely liked it is what is drawing them back this time.

However, the latest range of bubble tea outlets is drawing the crowds by touting quality and variety as its selling point.

Taiwanese brand Gong Cha first opened in November 2009 and now has 13 outlets here. It claims its tea is freshly brewed every day and each batch is kept for a maximum of four hours. Said operations director Goh Chee Cheng: "We don't consider ourselves similar to the cheaper brands with prices at a few remaining outlets plummeting to as low as $1 a cup. It is a cue for quality, hence the reason why lower-priced bubble tea are not selling well may be partly attributable to consumers' reliance on the pre-quality cue in this category."

Associate Professor Ang Swee Hoon, from the department of marketing at the National University of Singapore's Business School, said: "Often, consumers use price as a cue for quality, hence the reason why lower-priced bubble tea are not selling well may be partly attributable to consumers' reliance on the price-quality cue in this category."

"People bought them. It's nice, but definitely not worth the trouble," he said.

The brand has two outlets and will be opening a third one this month.

Surprisingly, marketing experts say that the higher prices this time round may be the reason for its popularity.

Marketing professor Jin K. Han of the Lee Kong Chian School of Business at the Singapore Management University said: "Often, consumers use price as a cue for quality, hence the reason why lower-priced bubble tea are not selling well may be partly attributable to consumers' reliance on the price-quality cue in this category."

Marketing experts say this second spring for bubble tea may, like the first one, not last.

Prof Ang said: "I think it's a food fad. We'll see another innovative beverage being introduced in the future and the demand for bubble tea will be affected."

Freelance copywriter Wong Wei Yang, 23, has never joined the queue for bubble tea.

"I've tried popular brands like Koi when my friends bought them. It's nice, but definitely not worth the trouble," he said.

"I would never waste 45 minutes queuing for a drink, nor would I pay $6 for a cup when there are so many alternatives around."