

# Chilli crab from a vending machine

**Kenneth Goh**

If your plans for reunion dinner on Chinese New Year's Eve fall through, there is a fuss-free way to rustle up a meal of chilli, black pepper or even salted egg yolk crabs.

Restaurant chain House of Seafood launched its Ready-to-Eat Crab vending machine at one of its outlets in The Punggol Settlement on Tuesday.

The machine dishes out three flavours of crabs – chilli, black pepper and salted egg yolk – that come piping hot in vacuum-sealed plastic boxes within 5½ minutes.

Customers can also purchase frozen pre-cooked crabs and heat them up in a microwave oven or stir-fry them at home. Each Sri Lankan crab comes chopped up in eight pieces and the shell has been slightly cracked, making it easier to get to the meat.

A box of Ready-to-Eat Crab weighs about 1kg and costs \$60 – similar to dine-in prices.

Besides crabs, the vending machine also sells three other dishes – bak kut teh, chicken rice and nasi lemak – at \$5 a box. These dishes are served hot within three minutes or come in frozen packs. Customers can pay with cash, credit card or e-wallet services such as Apple Pay. The machine operates around the clock.

Users select a dish from a touch-screen menu and choose cooked or frozen versions before making payment. An on-screen countdown timer begins once payment has been made as the food parcels are thawed and heated up to about 60 deg C in a built-in microwave oven. Lastly, the box is dispensed with a cutlery set that includes a bib and plastic gloves. Only one dish can be ordered at a time.

Mr Francis Ng, 44, the owner of House of Seafood, is turning to vending machines as a way of expanding his business as he faces manpower woes.

“With a lack of staff and their unwillingness to work long hours, I



House of Seafood owner Francis Ng with the offerings from his vending machine – nasi lemak, black pepper crab and bak kut teh.  
ST PHOTO: CAROLINE CHIA

need to transform my business to make it recession-proof with new technology,” he says. “I cannot survive by just operating restaurants.”

With vending machines, he says he can operate “multiple 24-hour shops” and switch their locations according to market demand, without incurring high set-up costs.

He plans to operate Ready-to-Eat Crab vending machines in two other outlets in Upper Serangoon Road and Joo Chiat Place next month. By March, there will be about 100 Ready-to-Eat Crab vending machines at Sentosa, industrial es-

tates, chalets and tertiary institutions.

He spent about \$3.8 million on the vending machines, which were imported from Italy. Part of the cost was defrayed by Spring Singapore's Capability Development Grant for small and medium-sized enterprises to build business capabilities.

The idea of a crab-dispensing vending machine hit after he developed microwave-ready pre-cooked crabs in 2015 as a convenient way for tourists to take the iconic dish home without fretting over how to cook them.

Demand for these crabs is healthy, with 1,000 sets sold each month at two House of Seafood outlets.

Mr Ng spent about \$1 million over three years developing the product and travelled to places such as Germany and Taiwan to consult with food packaging companies.

He says: “Everyone, from my chefs to family members, thought that it was a crazy idea to sell re-heated crabs.”

The biggest obstacle was ensuring that the meat remains soft after it has been re-heated.

He explains that “the secret” lies in its patented cooking, blast freezing and vacuum-packaging process. The customised blast freezer brings down the temperature of the cooked crabs, which have been cooked in a central kitchen, to minus 50 deg C within two minutes to preserve the meat's freshness. A German-made vacuum-packing machine removes air from the boxes while ensuring that the packaging holds its shape.

Mr Ng plans to roll out more crab dishes in the vending machine such as butter crab and crab bee hoon.

Customers who have tried the ready-to-eat crabs said the flavours were largely similar to freshly cooked versions, but pointed out that the meat was drier.

Customer relations manager Christine Ee, 34, says: “The salted egg yolk sauce is more watery, but the portion of crab is quite big. I hope that the machine can be near my office so that my colleagues and I can enjoy crabs during lunchtime.”

Digital marketing manager Annette Lim, 38, says: “Re-heated food usually doesn't taste as nice, but this crab tastes 80 per cent similar to freshly cooked versions. It would be easier to satisfy my craving for crabs if the machine is in my neighbourhood.”

**ST** Watch customers ordering crabs from a vending machine at <http://str.sg/4mA7>