Royal Selangor

Behind the Piala Seri Endon trophy

Royal Selangor, Malaysia’s premier pewter brand, has been sponsoring the Piala Seri Endon trophies since the batik design competition was launched in 2003. O.P. Jade chats to Datin Paduka Chen Mun Kuen, Director of Royal Selangor International Sdn Bhd, and tours the remarkable Visitor Centre in Setapak – to find out more about how the trophies are made and about this remarkable company.

The morning I arrived at Royal Selangor’s award-winning Visitor Centre in Setapak Jaya I was struck by how international in feel it was. Yes, the famous Giant Tankard does catch one’s eye, but the greenery surrounding the Centre, and the clean modern, architecture are welcoming and awe-inspiring as well. Why hadn’t I heard of it earlier? I wondered in surprise.

As I made my way to the escalator, the staff greeted me and the photographer with a friendly smile before leading us to the cosy café, where the aroma of coffee filled the morning air and an array of scrumptious cakes were on display.

Soon, we were joined by a smiling lady dressed in a red cheongsam. This was none other than Datin Paduka Chen Mun Kuen.

“Welcome to Royal Selangor,” she said. Her warm smile and firm handshake instantly assured me that the interview would be a comfortable and pleasant one. Also present that morning to welcome us were two other lovely ladies – Design Manager, Siti Fauziah Hj Abdul Kadir (who has been with Royal Selangor for more than 23 years) and Shamaine Othman, from the Communications department.

We sat down on one of the couches. “You must try the scones. They’re delicious!” exclaimed Datin Paduka Chen, with a smile. We readily complied!
Royal Selangor: Pewter in History

Royal Selangor is probably one of Malaysia’s most revered global brands, with products sold the world over in their own branches or in department stores. But how many of us know how it started? I asked five of my friends what they knew about this company and their responses ranged from “Isn’t it a government-owned company?” to “It belongs to one of the royal families, doesn’t it?”

The history of this prestigious pewter brand began in the south-eastern Chinese port of Shantou. It was in 1885 that Datin Paduka Chen’s grandfather, Yong Koon, a young pewtersmith, sailed to Nanyang (as the Chinese called Southeast Asia).

Yong Koon was already an apprentice pewtersmith and was just 14 years old when he arrived in Kuala Lumpur. A proud Hakka, Yong Koon and his brothers eventually started a pewter business at Jalan Silang (previously known as Cross Street). Operating out of a shop house, they made and sold simple household items – pewter incense burners, joss stick holders and candle stands, just to name a few items. Every piece would carry the brothers’ touch-mark, Ngeok Foh, which means Jade Peace, in Hakka.

Business was sluggish during the Second World War. The Japanese declared tin a controlled commodity. “It was a time of great uncertainty. Who would want to buy pewter?” reminisced Datin Paduka Chen. Despite all that, Yong Koon’s sons continued the pewter business. In 1942, Selangor Pewter was established.

From just one rented shop – half a shop to be exact – on Kuala Lumpur’s busiest street, Batu Road (now known as Jalan Tuanku Abdul Rahman), to the

The Piala Seri Endon trophy, awarded to the crème de la crème of Malaysia’s batik designers.
countless showrooms worldwide, this family-run business has indeed come a long way.

In the 1970s, the late Sultan Salahuddin Abdul Aziz Shah of Selangor was travelling in Australia when he stepped into a large department store with his entourage in tow.

The sales assistants, not knowing who the Sultan was, respectfully asked where he was from. The Sultan answered “Selangor”.

“Ah, Selangor Pewter,” the sales staff intoned. The Sultan was amused that the Australians had heard of Selangor Pewter, but not of the state of Selangor, nor of the Sultan of Selangor.

Upon his return to Malaysia, the Sultan decided that the pewter company should be granted royal status. In 1979, he conferred a royal warrant on Selangor Pewter. The Sultan also insisted that every pewter piece he bought be engraved with the words: “By royal appointment to his Royal Highness The Sultan of Selangor.”

Datin Paduka Chen personally attended to the Sultan. In 1992, the company officially changed its name to Royal Selangor, in recognition of the royal warrant.

**Creating the Piala Seri Endon trophy**

The annual Piala Seri Endon competition is now in its ninth year. Starting out with just one category, Fashion, the competition expanded to three categories when Soft Furnishing and Handicraft were added in 2004 and 2005 respectively.

Royal Selangor has produced all the trophies for the competition from the very start. When asked why Royal Selangor decided to sponsor the trophies, Datin Paduka Chen gave me a simple answer: “Why not?”

According to Datin Paduka Chen, the late Tun Endon Mahmood, after whom the competition is named, was an ardent patron of Royal Selangor. “She had a wide collection of our pewter products. When she developed the idea of the Piala Seri Endon batik design competition, Tun Endon personally approached me about the trophies. We had a discussion. I took a look at the design to see how we could encompass pewter in the final product. One thing led to another and voila!“ explained Datin Paduka Chen, as she held the trophy in her hands.

**The Process**

The making of the main 18-inch (approximately 460mm) high trophy involved several stages. This large trophy is kept by the competition organiser, Yayasan Budi Penyayang Malaysia. Royal Selangor makes smaller replicas for the winners to keep every year.

The handwork for the trophies is the difficult part. “Due to its intricate motif, each piece needs to be hand worked and filed to ensure the orchid motif is free from burrs or sharp edges,” explained Shamaine.

Then comes the staining. “The staining process is to ensure the inner parts of the trophy are darker than the outer parts, which are buffed to a shine. This gives the design depth,” said Datin Paduka Chen. “It may look simple, but it requires some skill to ensure the inner portion is evenly stained.”

According to Datin Paduka Chen, extra care is taken during the buffing process. “We have to make sure the trophies are not pressed too hard, or else some of the motifs may be buffed off or you end up having some...
edges that are too rounded,” she explained.

Shamaine later shared that the trick actually lies in balancing the pressure and using the correct amount of wax to give the trophy a shiny finish. “You don’t want too much wax because it will be a hassle when it comes to cleaning the trophy later on,” she said.

Apart from pewter, wood is also used. Both the wood and pewter parts are checked and certified by the line inspector before the trophy is assembled. The production line actually makes a sample of the trophy for approval – before the actual production gets into action. “The production line then follows the approved sample to produce all the trophies, with quality assurance consistently in place to ensure accuracy in all dimensions and finish of the end product,” explained Datin Paduka Chen.

Royal Selangor today
Today, Royal Selangor has gone global and sprouted wings. The company exports to more than 20 countries and has retail stores (showrooms) in many major cities.

With some 300 skilled pewter makers and more than 600 employees at its Setapak headquarters, the Royal Selangor Visitor Centre opens its doors to 400 to 500 visitors daily. Not only can you learn about the history of pewter – you can also have a hands-on experience and make your very own pewter bowl.

The School of Hard Knocks is an entertaining pewter-smithing workshop, where participants are taught to mould and create their own pewter dish – using traditional tools and methods!

“Imagine 40 to 50 people in the room – knocking and hammering at the same time! It is indeed a great stress reliever,” joked Datin Paduka Chen. For a small fee, participants can walk away with an apron, a certificate and their own masterpiece.

Trophies for World Events
You can also see Royal Selangor trophies at international events. The Singapore and China F1 Grand Prix trophies, and the Shanghai ATP Masters tennis tournament trophy are just some that are made by the 126-year-old pewter company. “We are constantly moving towards innovation and coming up with new designs and products,” shared Datin Paduka Chen.

Royal Selangor has also collaborated with the Malaysian Nature Society on a new collection, The Alam Collection, designed by two distinguished Malaysian sculptors, Tengku Sabri Ibrahim and Zainal Abidin Musa. “The Alam Collection will see a selection of pendants and sculptures inspired by Malaysia’s forests,” explained Datin Paduka Chen.

Their upcoming new Batik-themed series was launched in September 2011. This very unique and interesting range is now available at all retail outlets as well as on our online shop”. Datin Paduka Chen shared.

“Being a Malaysian company that has observed, benefitted from and played a role in this country’s growth for over a century – it is an honour to be able to contribute to our country’s movements and preserve our nation’s heritage.”

The Melon Teapot
Born and raised in pewter dust, Datin Paduka Chen can be seen at the Visitor Centre, wearing her trademark red cheongsam, sharing the story of the legendary Melon Teapot with visitors. I had read about the teapot and, as Datin Paduka Chen might say, became determined “to hear the story straight from the horse’s mouth”.

Datin Paduka Chen is more than happy to tell the story, despite “being asked to do so over a million and one times,” she joked, while holding the teapot.

In the museum, you will find the legendary pewter teapot on display. “It was during the Second World War when bombs were dropped everywhere, and everyone was ambushing well-stocked warehouses – to grab food for their families,” recalled Datin Paduka Chen.

One young man, known only as Ah Ham, was no exception. During the bombing mayhem, Ah Ham spotted a melon-shaped teapot.

“Just as he bent down to pick it up, a bomb fell and shrapnel whizzed over his head. Clutching tightly to the teapot, he was convinced that the teapot had mystically saved his life,” she said.

Ah Ham would serve tea to his friends with this teapot – while telling them the story about how it probably saved him. “One day, my husband visited him and, as usual, Ah Ham told him the story about the teapot. When my husband told Ah Ham that I worked in a pewter factory, he asked my husband to bring the teapot back, for some polishing. It was during the polishing that my staff noticed my grandfather’s touch-mark on the bottom of the pot.”

How the melon teapot made its way back to the Yong family has certainly become part of the legend itself. “We then asked Ah Ham to sell it to us. Though he initially refused, after giving it some thought, he knew it was best that the teapot be returned to its rightful owner.”