

# Stalwort in the face of a changed industry

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SAN FRANCISCO — Tucked into Ross Alley in Chinatown is yet another small San Francisco business whose fortune is uncertain due to rising rent prices. But when you speak to Kevin Chan, the owner of Golden Gate Fortune Cookie Factory, he keeps this fact tucked away.

Walking through the doors, it's as if you've been transported back in time. The family-run factory was opened in 1962 by Chan's mother and uncle. Chan's mother, Nancy Tom, still works at the factory along with three other part-time employees. The operation is one of the last of a handful of companies in the world to use machines built in 1956 for hand-folding the cookies. Even the recipe has been untouched by the hands of time.

"My mom's the one who knows the recipe, for her life. She's the one who created the recipe. She's the legacy, it's not me," said Chan. "I'm just one of the guys who happens to be here."

Despite the nostalgia it may conjure, the traditional method of production is costing Chan, Tom and their company significantly. His staff work for eight or nine hours a day, grabbing the pancake-like flat cookies from the hot plates of the machines. It's boring work, Chan said, that many younger people have no desire to do. The lack of fresh-faced employees, a \$15 minimum wage and competition that grows stronger every day may be enough to put them out of business. Pile on rent prices that have quadrupled from \$1,400 to



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Kevin Chan, manager and owner of Golden Gate Fortune Cookie Factory located in Ross Alley in Chinatown, compares the size of a regular and jumbo cookie.

\$6,000 a month in three years and that's enough to crack even the toughest cookie. Chan, however, is vowing to stick around.

"I'm not going to just walk away. I'm not going to give up. I will keep going for as long as I can," he told the BBC.

This strong spirit can be seen in everything Chan does. He's been working at the factory since he was nine years old and has the calluses to prove it.

"I'm numb already, I have no more feelings," he said about his hands. He rubbed the thick calluses on his pointer finger and thumb.

Chan grabbed the hot shells off of the customized waffle maker and folded them delicately by hand. Golden Gate is one of the last fortune cookie makers in the country hand-folding, which is less efficient than those employing machines only. The small company produces 10,000-15,000 cookies a day, while other companies in New York and Los Angeles can put out 1 million a day.

"There is no way I could make a profit. And then these other factories came along with modern technology," Chan told the BBC. "They use these fully automated machines. They can make 1 million cookies in a day, individually wrapped, and sell a box of 400 for \$8.95. I cannot compete with that."

However, speaking with and observing Chan, it's apparent that operating this factory for him isn't about the money at all. He gives away hundreds of the unfolded cookie shells a day to customers in line and strangers walking past the shop. This translates to massive amounts of money out of his pocket every day, but he isn't upset over losing out on that money.

"That's not the point, they don't have to buy it. They just can come and look," he said.

Chan appears unphased by the problems the factory is currently facing. In the early days of the business, his mother dealt with difficult challenges herself. A mural of her on the back wall of the factory depicts her story of struggle.

"In the old days there was

prostitution, gambling and gangs here, it was tough to do business," Chan said.

Although keeping his doors open to tourists slows him and his workers down, it's important to Chan to show people of all ages the culture of San Francisco, China and the cookie itself. He wants to continue the laborious work well into old age and bring the treats to as many people as he can.

"I love your guys' smile when you come. I love people, when they come in and they open the cookie and they feel very satisfied and fun," Chan said. "They're happy. It's the meditation, the cookies really meditate people because of the message."

The staff do everything they can to stay relevant against the competition and bring more customers into the store. Customers can pick from a variety of flavors, including green tea, chocolate or Chan's favorite, strawberry. They can also customize their fortunes for birthdays, graduations, even Super Bowl predictions. The best personal touch, said Chan, is popping the question with the ring inside the cookie. Chan demonstrates how it works with his own ring.

"We do them all the time. They come back to tell us. It's a 99% success rate," Chan said as he cracks open the cookie containing his wedding band.

The atmosphere of the shop is homey and comfortable, despite the heat and loud machines. This feeling is intentional, not

just for customers, but for the small staff as well. Chan said he treats his staff like family because the job is boring and many people don't want to do it. What keeps him afloat is seeing first-time customers amazed at the experience.

"Come see it. You will see it, you will know. Whatever I say, whatever you say, it doesn't count," he said. "Just come see it and feel it, feel the environment, taste the cookies and read the fortunes."

All hope may not be lost for the San Francisco establishment. In 2016, the city designated Golden Gate as a legacy business, which qualifies the company for rent stabilization grants and other benefits. They also have Mayor London Breed on their side, who promises to help in any way possible.

"It's really important to protect small businesses like this one. So, we're going to do everything to support them," she said, according to ABC7.

The whimsical treat is much more to Chan than just an after-takeout dessert. Not only are they his livelihood, but Chan views the process and the product as art. With his infectious smile and buoyant personality, it's hard to not want to jump into the driver's seat of one of the machines.

"Hopefully I can stay as long as I can and then finish my life 80 years old making cookies," Chan said.



Nancy Tom, Golden Gate Fortune Cookie Factory original co-owner and mother to owner Kevin Chan, mixes cookie batter into the cookie machine.