The man in his multiple machines

Prof Bernard Tan's intriguing collection reflects the amazing evolution of notebooks, reports GRACE CHING

C ALL Professor Bernard Tan a hoarder; over two decades, he has amassed about 15 notebooks—all Apple MacBooks and IBM ThinkPads. Why has he done so? Simply because the geek in him had to.

He has forgotten how much each costs, but notebooks in the early 90s easily carried a price tag of about US$4,000 ($5,500). Those in his collection are not for sale.

If there was a computer museum in Singapore, said Bernard, 64, a physics professor at the National University of Singapore (NUS), he would donate them to it.

Bernard began his hobby over 17 years ago, and among his collection, the PowerBook 180 takes pride of place. It is among Apple's first-generation notebook which came out in 1992. The price: about US$4,100, a princely sum then.

Singling out two others—a PowerBook 2400c and a Thinkpad 240—he said: "These two were probably the two smallest notebooks ever made at that time, which was about 1997-98 and 2002 respectively."

But why the penchant for only Macs and Thinkpads, you ask?

Put it down to concepts, said Bernard, who is so systematic that he lined up the eight machines for the photoshoot at his NUS work lab by historical order.

"They began life about the same time, the PowerBook in 1991 and the ThinkPad in 1992. They're both very well made and stylish, both have dedicated fans who would only buy Macs or Thinkpads," said Bernard, who is also an accomplished musician.

Machine fascination

His fascination with computers began when, as a teenager, he poured over the holy grail of electronics magazines, Popular Electronics. And he has the 1974 issue in which the MITT 8800 Altair was featured on the cover.

For the tech-challenged, the Altair is recognised as the spark that led to the PC revolution. Popular Electronics was the sort of magazine that folks like Steve Wozniak read while tinkering with computer kits that would eventually lead him and Steve Jobs—co-founders of Apple Computers—to come up with the Apple I in 1976.

"I think people in my generation were very passionate about these machines because we witnessed the evolution of technology from zero to what it is today," Bernard said.

Indeed, Bernard's gallery traces those design evolutions. For instance, the trackball featured in a PowerBook 180 gave way to a track pad in later models. Early notebooks were bulky—about 4cm thick, with a barbell-like weight of at least 4kg. Slimmer notebooks started appearing with the ThinkPad 20, which he also has.

Along the way, Bernard, who formed the Microcomputer Society of Singapore which still exists today, has also gleaned some detectable bits of information.

Like how the ThinkPads resemble bento boxes and the ThinkPad 700, 560 and 300 series resemble car company BMW's marques.

Like a concerned father Bernard gives his mechanised "babies" regular boot-ups every six months to ensure they are alive.

"If they aren't, I just shake them up a bit, something inside will 'catch' and it starts up," he added.

And he spares no expense to make them well if they fall sick. For instance, when parts fail, he heads to eBay to pick up components.

They (can cost) from tens of dollars to a couple of hundred dollars, he said.

Space for more

TO BE sure, Bernard's stockpile doesn't consist of only the notebooks in his lab. There are desktop Macs and Apple monitors including a couple of Apple IIE which came out in 1983. Again, for the tech-challenged, the Apple IIE was the longest-living computer in Apple's history.

It was sold for nearly 11 years with relatively few changes. For this reason, it was the most commonly recognised model in the Apple II line.

When he bought the PowerBook 2400, it was because it was the most powerful notebook available in 1997 with 180MHz CPU speed upgradable to 240MHz. It came with 16MB RAM which can be expanded to 144MB. Hard disk was between 1GB and 3GB. Today you can get those specs on a handheld smartphone.

But the man is not done yet. He's eyeing the 5kg Mac Portable, going on eBay for about US$1,000 ($1,450).

How does his wife put up with his eccentricity?

"She already thinks I'm nuts collecting these machines." But at least, it's not PCs which take up more storage space, he rationalises.

Anyway, "it's better than collecting antique cars which are more expensive."

Bernard arranged part of his collection, which includes Apple's first-generation 1992 notebook, in historical order. The NUS physics professor has amassed 15 Apple MacBooks and IBM ThinkPads.

Like a loving father, Bernard gives his "babies" regular boot-ups every six months to ensure they're alive. "If they aren't, I just shake them up a bit, something inside will 'catch' and it starts up."

He built his own Apple IIE

ough an Apple Macintosh fan since the 80s, Professor Bernard Tan did not always use Mac computers. His favourite computer shop in the 1970s was the one called The Computer Centre in the Golden Mile shopping complex. He bought a SWITPC (Southwest Tech Product) 6800 there for about $10,000.

"Those days that was how much computers cost. Even an Apple II with a dot matrix machine was close to $10,000," he said.

He may have been one of the first to buy a Mac computer in 1978 from Diversitech, which for a long time was Apple's distributor here.

In fact, he built the first Apple computer here even before the company set up its factory.

When he started working at the National University of Singapore, his lab technician got hold of an Apple PC board (circuitry board).

Since all the components in the Apple IIE were commercially available, the duo bought them off the shelf.

"We flashed the ROM ourselves, that is, programmed the memory components, and bought the power supply. We needed a case, so I went to The Computer Centre and begged the owner for an Apple III casing.

"He had this casing that was broken at the back, so after much persuasion, he gave that to me. And I had a working Apple II.

Like the Apple III, with a 5¼ external disk, still sits in his lab.