

# Short cuts

In tough economic times, new chain businesses are filling a niche by offering quick haircuts for NT\$100

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In and out: QB Cut is one among several new chains in Taiwan offering NT\$100 haircuts, often in 10 minutes or less.

PHOTOS: DAVID CHEN, TAIPEI TIMES

osing hair over the economic downturn? A growing number of people are doing so happily, as they frequent a new crop of budget hair salons popping up across the country.

Offering NT\$100 haircuts at central locations, QB Cut (快美屋) is among several chains luring customers from traditional barbers and mid-priced salons, where prices range from NT\$200 to NT\$1,000 or more for a wash and cut.

"Cheap and fast" were the most common reasons cited by customers visiting QB Cut, which opened most of its locations within or near Taipei MRT stations.

On a typical weekday, QB Cut's Shilin (士林) branch sees between 80 to 90 customers, said stylist Ruby Liao (廖宛庭). On weekends that number rises to between 150 to 200 people, she said.

Inspired by similar chains in Japan and Singapore, QB Cut displays a branding savvy that offers the "in and out" appeal of convenience stores.

Before contacting the owners for an interview, I went for a trim at QB Cut's branch inside the National Taiwan University Hospital MRT Station (台大醫院捷運站).

At a glance the shop looks like a small laundromat, with a flat screen TV tuned to TVBS and a brightly lit blue and yellow sign in Chinese that read "Haircuts, NT\$100 in 10 minutes."

Appointments are walk-in only. Customers pay for their haircut first by purchasing a ticket from an automated machine outside the door, then wait for their number to be called.

My haircut, performed by a friendly stylist who looked to be in her early 20s, took about eight minutes. I came away satisfied, but then again it was basically just a buzz cut. The haircuts aren't actually timed, but often take

less than 10 minutes, my stylist said.

But what if a customer has a specific request? Stylists can take as much time as they need, but if there are a lot of people, of course her boss wants the haircuts done as quickly as possible, she said.

Unlike Taipei's upscale hair salons, which constantly try to one-up each other with elaborate and fancy decors and interiors, QB Cut shops are a plain, almost sterile affair.

Each shop, which takes up an average of 6 ping (20m<sup>2</sup>), is furnished only with chairs and mirrors attached to cabinet sets, each equipped with a vacuum for cleaning up hair clippings. Haircuts are the only service offered — no washing, hair dyes or massages.

For one of QB Cut's owners, Lin Wen (林文), the no-frills approach simply makes sense for current times.

"To do something as expensive as [a high-end salon], people just don't have the money for it," the hair stylist-turned-entrepreneur said in an interview with the *Taipei Times*.

"I used to cut hair for NT\$2,000, but now I teach stylists to cut for only NT\$100," he said, referring to his company's mandatory training program.

The company requires its stylists to either have formal vocational training or experience working in a hair salon, he said, so they can quickly learn the "techniques" needed to cut hair fast.

#### SALON QUALITY?

QB Cut's haircuts may be fast and cheap, but they're also, Lin said, of salon quality: "It's not NT\$100 for something cheap, it's NT\$100 for good style."

But hair stylists like Eddie Tham (譚錦榮) are doubtful. Tham, who works at Mix and Match (羅曼奴) on Zhongxiao East Road, says NT\$100 salons have to rely on a "set procedure" to cut hair quickly.

"Every person's head has a different shape. You can't use one [formula] and apply it to everyone ... whether your head is round, long or oval — they cut it the same," he said.

A wash, haircut and blow-dry takes 40 minutes at the minimum for people with short hair, he said.

While Tham says his business has declined with the recent economic climate, QB Cut claims a steady flow of customers. The company has served more than 500,000 customers at its 10 stores since it opened in late 2006, according to Lin.

The business is profitable, if just barely, said Lin. He declined to provide exact figures, but said QB Cut gains "slim profits through high business volume," making approximately 10 percent per haircut.

F100, one of QB Cut's main competitors, claimed a profit margin of around 11 percent or 12 percent per haircut in a recent report on Formosa TV (民視). The company has 50 stores in cities across the country and operates many of its branches at hypermart stores like Carrefour (家樂福) and RT Mart (大潤發).

But whether NT\$100 salons can maintain a balance between quality and costs remains to be seen, said Chen Te-hsiung (陳德雄), president of OMC (Organisation Mondiale Coiffure) Taiwan, the national chapter of an international hairdressers' association that organizes professional and student competitions.

In an e-mail interview, Chen said the emergence of NT\$100 salons was a positive development for consumer demand, but from an industry standpoint, would hurt mid-priced salons.

They are now at risk of "easily losing their customer base," and the industry could see a

widening gap between high-end and budget salons, he said.

#### FAST AND CHEAP

No specific figures are available on the volume of Taiwan's hair salon and barber business, as the Ministry of Economic Affairs (經濟部) lumps hair salons with other businesses under the category of "other service industries."

Lin said QB Cut originally targeted office workers, and was surprised to find "children, mothers and older folks" among its customer base.

QB Cut appears to hold widest appeal with men, who comprised seven out of 10 customers on a weekday afternoon last week at the company's Shilin branch.

Several customers said they visited at least once a month. To be sure, the four people willing to be interviewed — all men — said they were more concerned about price and speed rather than quality.

Esju Lin (林翰屏), a 40-year-old mechanical engineering graduate student currently serving in the military, said he liked how fast it was compared to the mid-priced salons, which he said could take up to three hours.

One of the only female customers that afternoon declined to be interviewed after having her ends trimmed. "Have to go, I'm in a hurry," she said.



**QB CUT** has locations inside the following Taipei MRT stations: Jingmei (景美捷運站), Dingxi (頂溪捷運站), NTU Hospital (台大醫院捷運站), Banqiao (板橋捷運站), Yong'an Market (永安市場捷運站) and Da'an (大安捷運站), and one branch outside exit No. 3 (3號出口) of the Taipower Building MRT Station (台電大樓捷運站) at 119 Shida Rd. (師大路119號). For a full list of locations, visit [www.qbcut.com.tw/index1.asp](http://www.qbcut.com.tw/index1.asp)  
**ON THE NET:** [www.qbcut.com.tw](http://www.qbcut.com.tw)

**F100** has dozens of locations across Taiwan, including many at Carrefour and RT Mart hypermart stores. For a full list of locations, visit [tw.myblog.yahoo.com/qcf100](http://tw.myblog.yahoo.com/qcf100)  
**ON THE NET:** [www.f100.com.tw](http://www.f100.com.tw)

**MIX AND MATCH** (羅曼奴) is a mid-priced salon located at 3F, 285, Zhongxiao E Rd Sec 3, Taipei City (台北市忠孝東路三段285號3F)