



There's a sense of unconscious vandalism that we need to address and that's what I am trying to do through this series

— VAIBHAV RAJ SHAH

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Violet Vaz chats up city-based home-baker **Rakshinda Ansari** about her passion for baking and her special skill of making customised themed cakes



cake!" she says. Rakshinda's forte is customised cakes. "People usually come to me and show me pictures of something they want on the cake. I've even had a few customers who have insisted that I make them a colour palette so that I don't get the shade of pink or red wrong." But she prefers clients spelling out the details. "It then becomes much easier for me to cater to them. I also do a lot of research before customising themed cakes to ensure that I get the concept right," informs Rakshinda who has customised cakes based on fairy tales and cartoons to moulding characters from movies and television serials. More than baking, it is the decoration and minute detailing that consumes a lot of time. Rakshinda also specialises in stenciling, moulding and decorating cakes. She personally crafts each product with fresh and pure fruits, cocoa, essences, fondant icing and creams. "My cakes are 100 per cent edible and contain no preservatives," she says.

An enriching experience

The whole experience of baking has been very enriching for her. "I've learnt so much over the years through the clients I've met," she says. But Rakshinda is in no hurry to open her own bakery. She tells us why: "Not owning my own store gives me the choice to bake whenever I feel like. I have never believed in the idea that creativity flows only between 9 and 5! Also, I can go on a vacation whenever I want."

Just recently, she started displaying a few of her desserts at YogurtBay in Koregaon Park, which adds another chapter to Rakshinda's sweet story.



Pic: Parag Jadhav



Rakshinda Ansari, Founder, XOXO Desserts

Baking with love

Most people retire from work as they near their 60s, but Rakshinda Ansari is nowhere close to retirement. Abounding with energy and a passion for designing and baking cakes, she's in fact planning to expand her work. A home-baker by choice, Rakshinda is the owner and designer of XOXO Desserts which she started five years ago. The talented baker can whip up anything from an assortment of cakes, cupcakes, brownies, cookies to chocolate mousse and other desserts.

"Baking for me is very therapeutic," says Rakshinda, who is a cancer survivor, adding, "I enjoy every moment of it. Baking has given me a whole new purpose to life."

She usually bakes early in the morning or late at night when no one is around in her kitchen at home. "Baking is something that I love to do, so I need my own space and time for it," she informs and in the same breath adds that she couldn't have pursued her passion without the constant support and encouragement from her children.

The orders started pouring in

Rakshinda's daughter used to work in the US and every summer Rakshinda would visit her. "My daughter used to enroll me for short courses at the Institute of Culinary Education (ICE) in New York. That's where I learned a lot about desserts and baking," says Rakshinda who rediscovered her love

and talent for baking during the summers she spent at ICE. However, the thought of baking for others and selling goodies never crossed her mind. "It was never my idea to go commercial," she says.

The turning point was when her daughter relocated to India. She was the one who encouraged Rakshinda to start selling cakes and desserts. "My daughter organised a 'high tea' at home and she invited our friends and family. I prepared a number of pastries, desserts, macarons and cakes for them. That was the 'push' that I needed," recalls Rakshinda. Soon the orders started pouring in.

Hugs and kisses

Along with delectable desserts Rakshinda has an interesting name for her goodies' brand. Explains she, "XOXO is a shorthand way of writing hugs and kisses. I felt this was an apt name for delicious cakes and desserts. It embodies love, happiness and celebration!"

Customising cakes

No birthday party is complete without a cake, and a special cake adds a special touch. "I always tell my customers that the birthday cake at a party is something that is always remembered. You will always click a picture of the birthday girl/ boy cutting the

AN OPEN APPROACH

City-based educator, **Priti Bhandari** was the only Indian amongst three others who was invited to learn The Reggio Emilia Approach in Italy. **Rajlaxmi Arora** chats her up and finds out more on training and how she plans on implementing it

Pic: Anand Chaihi



Priti Bhandari

A mother to two teenagers, Priti Bhandari, tried to rear them up a little differently. Her thrust was on experiential teaching and hands-on learning, which was quite similar to the Reggio Emilia Approach. In December 2014, she was invited to attend its International Study Group in Italy. The Reggio Emilia Approach is an educational philosophy focused on pre-school and primary education, which was developed by Loris Malaguzzi.

A self-taught educator, Priti says, "I have always had a keen interest in understanding various education systems and syllabi. I also travelled to garner more information on various courses and then initiated project-based education for my own children and their friends in 2006."

After two years of teaching her children, Priti realised that her approach matched with the Reggio philosophy. She then got in touch with the teachers at Reggio who guided and eventually invited her to train with them in December.

"I trained at Reggio's for 25 days. Prior to that, I shared with them a background of my work and a few ideas which was my ticket to Italy," explains she.

When asked about Indian education system, Priti says that it has its merits.

"I feel that the Indian education system is a solid system, but it needs a skill-development programme to complement it. I am trying to work on a system which will ensure this. I want to make the children look at the schooling subjects from a different dimension."

Ask her on how she plans on implementing her approach and Priti remarks, "We would be starting Prithwe Learning Centre in the month of July which aims to approach learning in an open environment where children learn themselves by experiencing life in totality. The objective is to create awareness among children who would represent their culture and heritage to the world."

What's Reggio Emilia Approach?

The Reggio Emilia Approach is based on the principles of respect, responsibility and community through exploration and discovery. The learning is conducted through a supportive and enriching environment based on the interests of the children through a self-guided curriculum.



+ BITS

Ladies, pick formals smartly

Shopping for non-casual wear can be a task in itself as you are unable to decide between what is appropriate and what's not. Nidhi Agarwal, founder and CEO of western non-casual wear brand Kaaryah, doles out a few shopping tips:

Fit: Fit is the most important criteria vis-à-vis definition of "appropriateness" to an occasion. While general rules for sleeve length, pant lengths apply, wearing a well-fitted garment is also a function of preference and what suits your body shape.

Functionality: Just as you may not wear walking shoes to a board meeting, you may want to rethink your stilettos on a factory visit. So, stay comfortable while looking good.

Go beyond boring: Formal wear doesn't necessarily mean plain. Wearing bright colours, detailed embroidery or frills are not improper as long as they are not distracting.

Fashion forward: You can even take inspiration from runways and incorporate fashion into formal clothing. *JANS*

One day... it will be a rosy future



HER STORY

She wakes up at the crack of dawn, takes a bus from Loni Kalbhor to Marketyard, carefully selects the fruits available and lugs around the crate to Shivajinagar, where she manages the stall. At 8 in the evening, she winds up her day and travels back to Loni Kalbhor. Day after day, rain or shine, Fatima Nasir Shaikh has followed this routine for 15 years.

Fatima is originally from Burse, a village near Solapur. Married at an early age, she moved to Pune and began selling fruits along with her husband. She looks after the fruit stall, while her husband sells fruits to the railway passengers.

Fatima's life has been full of hardship and struggle, but she wants the best for her two sons.

Her younger son is pursuing his graduation and also works at a petrol pump to contribute to the family kitty. Her older son works in Billguard company.

Fatima's calm demeanor breaks into a smile, when she talks about the distant future. "I will sell fruits, work hard and earn money for my family. After a few years, when I grow old, my sons will take care of me," she smiles.

Till the day, the distant future becomes her present, Fatima is prepared to carry on with her rigorous schedule. She doesn't compromise on work ethics and stocks only the best ware. She deals with her clients with patience and a smile, and believes that one day, everything will be sorted out. A chat with Fatima wraps up with a salute to her patient resolve and her hope that 'All will be well.'

— AS TOLD TO MRUNMAYI SAPATNEKAR