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The curious case of a vegan in Thane

By: Fiona Fernandez Date: 2010-10-24 Place: Mumbai

What's a non-milk, non-animal fat follower doing in the distant Mumbai suburb? Why, baking cakes of course. Sunday MiD DAY spends an afternoon with vegan baker Rithika Ramesh surrounded by whole wheat cupcakes and peanut milk

"It wasn't planned. Nor did I experience any life-changing, eureka moment," confesses Rithika Ramesh about her initiation into veganism. The mass media student and Thane resident has been whipping up baked vegan goodies since February this year, when she launched her online bakery cum blog, Green Stove.



The vegan wedding cake

"The plan was to create a three-tier Chocolate Ganache cake since the bride loved chocolate. It took an entire night to make," says Ramesh about her first vegan wedding cake. "I used cake flour, soy milk, sugar and chocolate to make this whole wheat cake. I also made motifs with the letters 'R' and 'P' (bride-groom's initials) in Tamil on the cake since it was part of their wedding stationery."

Exit camera, enter apron

Circa 2006-07: Rithika assisted Sagar Ballary for the popular urban flick, Bheja Fry. "It was an enjoyable experience," she reminisces. Next, she assisted Lalitha Krishna for a documentary on dogs. But by the end of this project, animal-loving Ramesh had undergone a gradual shift of mind.

In March 2009, she called it quits. She travelled, read and tuned into her baking skills. By December, she signed up as a volunteer with Sharan, an Auroville based non-profit organisation that practices a holistic health approach.

The vegan bug had surfaced. Later, a one-day vegan cooking workshop conducted by Sharan's Dr Nandita Shah in Mumbai was sufficient fodder to take this passion to another level. She turned vegan. "My parents were supportive. Hailing from a vegetarian background made it easier," admits the 25 year-old.

The vegan alternative

Chocolate-crazy Ramesh learnt that despite her sweet tooth, she could follow her choice with ease. "Almost every dairy product is replaceable. Peanut milk replaces buttermilk, any non-smelling oil like rice bran or sunflower can replace butter, dairy-free cream can replace the whipped variety, soya milk suffices for milk while (silken) tofu can take paneer's place."

Indian and South Asian cuisines are the easiest to adopt for a vegan, she believes. "Veganism can be a healthy lifestyle choice for diabetics; it helps reverse heart disease and is effective in weight loss plans. Simply avoid jaggery, oil and ghee. People are surprised that health issues can be related to milk," she adds, talking of how she recently pulled off a vegan catering order for 50 recovering diabetics.

Her USP are the cupcakes but she also makes quiches, mousse, cookies and breads. There are doggie treats too, minus the excess salt or sugar. Orders pour in from Mumbai and Thane. Her grandma's home in Matunga is the pick-up point for city orders. Green Stove also delivers drier bakes across India.

Her suburb is warming up to the idea, she smiles. "Thaneites are pleasantly surprised about a vegan baking option right here." Ramesh uses locally available products for all her bakes. She's enthusiastic about the future -- "I want to start a bakery and a vegan tiffin service too."

Clearly, lifestyle choices don't come in the way of the passionate. And the sweet toothed.

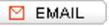
Cupcakes Rs 150 (10 refined wheat pieces) and Rs 170 (10 whole wheat mini cupcakes) onwards;

Cookies Rs 100 (200 gms, refined wheat) onwards; Breads (Loaves, Baguettes, Focaccia or Braided) Rs 35 onwards; Animal Treats Rs 100 (150 gms)

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