

A FORK ON THE ROAD

Ex-financial advisor makes dough of a different kind



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The next best thing to giving homemade cookies this time of year is giving cookies handmade by someone else — especially

if that someone is Sharmila Melwani. She turns out beautiful cookies that taste great and look like they took hours to decorate (because they do), unlike so many commercial ones that are pretty but dry and tasteless.

Melwani pays attention to detail, slipping each cookie into a small plastic bag and tying it with ribbons and a jaunty jingle bell. The attractive packaging makes even a single cookie a special gift. For the holidays, there are Christmas trees festooned with candy pearls, candy canes, ornaments, snowflakes and stars, to name a few designs, all covered in a smooth layer of almond-flavored fondant, some with piped royal icing details.



LINDA BLADHOLM/FOR THE HERALD

ALL OCCASIONS: Sharmila Melwani hand-decorates and packages cookies for holidays and special occasions.

Jamaica. The family left Kingston in 1977, resettling in Miami. Melwani, 38, earned an MBA from the University of Miami and became a financial consultant.

The cookie business was born in July when she began planning her daughter Liana's first birthday party. She wanted to make cookie party favors, and a professional baker friend gave her a basic sugar-cookie recipe. She tinkered with it, and also experimented with decorations, settling on a combination of fondant (a type of icing that can be rolled and sculpted)

and luster dust (pigmented sugar powder). She drew on details with markers filled with food coloring.

The cookies were a hit, and soon she was baking up baby elephants, yellow duckies and heart-shaped cookies for friends' showers and birthdays. Teachers begged her to do children's parties. Neighbors raved. Her husband, Vijay, gave her a KitchenAid mixer for her birthday, and she added coconut macaroons, star bars (star-shaped cookie-brownies) and pumpkin cheesecake bars.

Business took off. She now

COOKIES

CHOCOLATE STAR BARS

The butter cookie recipe is a carefully guarded secret, but Sharmila shared this one for a buttery cookie crust filled with a brownie-like chocolate mixture, topped with crumbled crust and dusted in powdered sugar to look like snow. If you prefer, simply cut the finished bars into squares.

- 1 cup butter (two sticks), softened
- ½ cup sugar
- ¼ teaspoon salt
- 2 cups all-purpose flour
- 1 (14-ounce) can sweetened condensed milk
- 1 cup milk-chocolate chips
- ½ teaspoon vanilla

Heat the oven to 350 degrees. For the crust, beat the butter in a large bowl with an electric mixer on medium-high speed for about 45 seconds. Beat in the sugar and salt. Beat in the flour until well-combined. Press ¾ of the mixture into a 9-by-13-inch baking pan.

Combine the condensed milk and chocolate pieces in a heavy saucepan. Simmer and stir over low heat until chocolate is melted. Stir in vanilla. Spread hot chocolate mixture over the crust. Crumble remaining crust mixture over the chocolate. Bake about 35 minutes, until golden on top. While still warm, use a large, star-shaped cookie cutter to cut out stars, saving the scraps for nibbling, or cut with a knife into bars. Sprinkle with powdered sugar. Makes 6 large or 8 small stars or 20 bar cookies. **Source:** Sharmila Melwani.

Per bar (based on 20): 274 calories (45 percent from fat), 14.2 g fat (7.6 g saturated, 5.3 g monounsaturated), 33.5 mg cholesterol, 3.9 g protein, 34.6 g carbohydrates, 0.8 g fiber, 115.1 mg sodium.

MORE ONLINE

Sharmila Melwani's pumpkin cheesecake bar recipe and Linda Bladhholm's online forum are at herald.com/living; click Food.

has the cookies made to her specifications at a bakery and does the decorating at home.

"My family can't believe I decided to do this," Melwani says, "but I wanted to pursue my creativity through baking, and I was tired of traveling for business."

The cookies are constantly evolving. A meditative "om" symbol has become one of her signatures, painted in a silvery flourish on white stars, perfect for yoga fans. Cookies can be

customized with names, holiday greetings or any sentiment a customer wishes to express.

Sharmila Melwani's cookies cost \$2.50 to \$6.50. Call 954-232-1328 or visit cooklesbyshar.com for ordering information.

CORRECTION

The phone number for Lung Gong Chinese restaurant was misstated in last week's column. The correct number is 305-553-4644.



MELWANI

She is of Indian descent with family roots in the Sind, in what is now southwest Pakistan. In 1947 Melwani's parents joined relatives in