



DOZENS OF SWEETS: Sharmila Melwani bakes cookies at Euro Bread & Cafe L'Originale in Davie to benefit Share Our Strength.

HELPING THE NEEDY

A COOKIE CONNOISSEUR IS TAKING PART IN A BAKE SALE TO BENEFIT HUNGER RELIEF

BY BETH FEINSTEIN-BARTL
Special to The Miami Herald

Sharmila Melwani puts a sweet-tasting spin on volunteering by baking up batches of cookies for charity.

Most of her efforts are on behalf of Share Our Strength, a nationwide nonprofit hunger-relief organization dedicated to feeding needy children. Melwani will join local organizers from the group for their annual Great American Bake Sale, totting treats from her commercial kitchen in Davie. The fundraiser being held from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Sunday at the Aventura Mall, 19501 Biscayne Blvd. in Aventura.

Melwani, owner of Cookies by Shar, expects to set out 300 to 400 tempting morsels at her booth. Folks can snap up chocolate chip sandwiches, or pick from edible, colorful characters shaped like pirates and princesses. More creations will be provided by area restaurants, resorts, markets and bakeries. There also will be raffles, a cookie-decorating station for kids and a cooking demonstration by chef Allen Susser of Chef Allen's restaurant in Aventura. Baked goods will cost \$2 to \$5 each.

"It's very affordable and it's all going to charity," Melwani said. "There's going to be an amazing array. I've gained 10 pounds just thinking about all the stuff I'll be buying."

The sale has been held at the mall since 2006. Organizers are seeking to top last year's total of \$7,000, Melwani said.

"I've been extraordinarily blessed with two beautiful children and an unexpected second career that allows me to spread joy while doing what I love," said Melwani, who has a daughter, Liana, 4, and a son, Viraj, 2. "This is a cause that's close to my heart."

Melwani's efforts don't end when the last crumb is scooped up at the bake sale. She's serving on a committee for another Share Our Strength fundraiser, Taste of the Nation Miami, July 24 at the Ritz-Carlton on Key Biscayne. Melwani will continue contributing 5 percent of sales from her business to the organization, a



PHOTOS BY EILEEN SOLER/FOR THE MIAMI HERALD

GETTING READY: Sharmila Melwani of Planation, owner of Cookies By Shar, prepares for this weekend's charity bake sale.

practice she began a year ago.

A management consultant for nearly a decade, Melwani switched to baking three years ago. She changed careers after being unhappy with treats she purchased for her daughter's first birthday party.

Experimenting with recipes and word of mouth led to taking orders online at her website and by phone. She has built up a large clientele, ranging from corporate bigwigs to bridal parties. Her cookies can also be purchased at the Euro Bread Cafe in Davie. The Museum of Art/Fort Lauderdale, where she's planning to hold a cookie-decorating class for children this summer, carries her treats too.

Cookies by Shar is one of several

enterprises with Broward addresses taking part in the Great American Bake Sale. Others include We Take the Cake in Fort Lauderdale and Edda's Cake Designs, which operates a storefront in Pembroke Pines and three locations in Miami.

The bake sale marks the first time that Edda's is participating, said Krystinne Espinosa, an account coordinator at the main office in Miami.

"I think it's great," Espinosa said. "I love how all these businesses are coming together for a good cause."

For information, call the Aventura Mall at 305-935-1110, or visit www.strength.org or www.cookiesbyshar.com.