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# The taste of nostalgia: Bruna Fernandes upholds 90-year-old family legacy of Goan cooking

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**ALDONA:** Nachinola's Bruna (Efru) Fernandes, 71, is best known for preparing traditional Goan dishes like *vonn* — a sweet, coconut-based delicacy — and *sheth-xit*, the comforting daily staple of rice and curry that graces every traditional Goan table.

This taste of Goa, often known as *bhikreachem jevonn*, is served at weddings, house inaugurations, and other special occasions. The prime dishes include *vonn*, *samariachi kodd*, two types of *mellgor* — *chonneacho* and *dudhyacho*, *nustem* (fried fish), *xit* (rice), and *tora shireo* (raw mango preparation).

**BRUNA PROUDLY SHARES THE ORIGINS OF THESE AUTHENTIC DISHES:**

"This time-honoured tradition was begun by our ancestors and has endured through the generations. I have devoted the past forty years of my life to this craft, carrying forward a legacy my mother upheld for over

50 years before me."

Today, her family's connection to this culinary tradition spans more than 90 years.

Speaking about how she learned to cook such delicious fare, she says, "I did not get any formal training. Whatever I know, I learned by watching and working with my mother. My sister would also help."

The secret behind her acclaimed cooking lies in her masala, a carefully blended mixture of 22 ingredients including chillies, onions, ginger, garlic, and coconut, freshly ground in Mapusa.

"A lot of effort goes into preparing this masala. While it is easy to enjoy the food, making it is both time-consuming and labour-intensive," she says.

Despite the slightly higher cost of her dishes, people continue to place orders because she never compromises on flavour.

"The first thing I do when I receive an order is buy all the necessary ingredients. It takes me over two days to prepare everything. Some dishes, like *vonn* and *samariachi kodd*, require advance preparation. For example, *samariachi kodd* must be made the day before the function to allow the gravy to develop its full flavour. You can't make and deliver it on the same day," she explains.

Due to health concerns, Bruna now takes only home orders for a limited number of customers.



**BRUNA HAS ONE HEARTFELT APPEAL TO THE YOUNGER GENERATION:**

**I urge everyone to keep Goan delicacies alive. The younger generation must learn and carry forward this tradition, or else future generations may never get to experience our traditional Goan cuisine. Today, everything is being replaced by packaged food — but true Goan food cannot be packed. It lives in the heart and soul of every Goan.**

"Earlier, my earnings were very low, but I managed. I remain the chief cook even today, not allowing helpers to handle the main tasks — they only assist with prep and chores. I personally oversee everything to maintain quality — as good food requires patience and slow cooking. Cleanliness and hygiene are non-negotiable for me."

Bruna once aspired to work in an office. Life, however, had different plans for her.

"I even applied for a government job, but I was refused, being told there were no suitable positions for women. After my husband's death, I chose to continue this trade. It was destiny's path for me."

While her children know how to make a few dishes, Bruna says the full mastery of these recipes — and the connection to the tradition — is unique.

"The true significance of these dishes lies in the way people respond after eating them — they thank me and pray for my good health. It's a blessing," she smiles.

Preparing *bol* (another coconutty Goan sweet) is another painstaking process she takes pride in.

"It starts with grinding wheat into flour, then mixing it with jaggery, rice, and toddy, and wrapping it in leaves. We grate 10 to 15 coconuts by hand and grind the flesh with jaggery on a traditional stone grinder. No modern mixers for me!

For a batch of 25 kg of *bol*, she uses around 2 kg of wheat. After mixing, the batter is left to ferment before being baked the next day.

"This work helped me raise my children and meet our basic needs. In our time, we had little education and few opportunities. I have done many kinds of jobs — working in fields, selling cashews, gardening, even making garlands — just to survive."

Today, Bruna's dishes — and her



signature masala — have travelled far beyond Goa.

"People take my food abroad — even to America! True Goan delicacies are hard to find abroad. The authenticity remains rooted here, and whenever people return, they long for these tastes and take some back for their families and friends."

Despite the challenges of age and health, Bruna remains committed to her craft. "My favourite dishes to prepare are *mellgor* and *samariachi kodd*. As long as my health permits, I will continue cooking."

## A JOURNEY INTO THE HEART OF GOA

In our continuous efforts to put people at the centre of our journalism, we bring to you a weekly collection of stories, specially curated from our ground-level reportage which celebrates the joys, and shares the sorrows of people in their grassroots. These are, at heart, very simple stories, simply told. Interesting initiatives, out-of-the-box thinking, dogged persistence on any issue, and the struggles of people over the years as they try and put their disrupted lives back together are not just news stories.

Each is a document from the wards and vaddos of Goa, a postcard, a letter, a share. This collection is brought to you from O Heraldo's team of reporters who have been given one simple mandate - go out, travel, and speak to people about their lives.

From Wards and Vaddos is as much your project as O Heraldo's and we welcome all of you on this journey into the heart of Goa. Please email editor@herald-go.com or reach us on Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram.



## Parra's watermelon queen: Darshana Pednekar's journey of grit and growth

No Goan summer passes without the irresistible call of a watermelon. There's no match for the melons from the fields of Parra, and at the heart of this fame is Vilasini aka Darshana Pednekar, master watermelon farmer

ERWIN FONSECA

**PARRA:** Darshana was born into a hardworking farmer family in Mandrem just after Goa's liberation, earning her the fond moniker of "Liberation baby" from her parents and relatives. She grew up in the outdoors, working in the fields with her parents. After marrying into Parra, Bardez, about 35 years ago, she carried forward the 'yoke' of farming with an unwavering spirit. "In North Goa, if one speaks of agriculture, one must visit the farmers of Pernem to witness their dedication. My parents instilled in us both the value of education and the bond with the land," she says.

Though known as Vilasini in her native village, after marriage, she became popularly known as Darshana in Bardez — a name given by her husband. But changing her name didn't change her essence: hard work was in her blood. Soon after marriage, the couple bought a field near the famous Maddani area in Parra, and over the years, Darshana turned it into a veritable gold mine, cultivating paddy,



### PICKING THE SWEETEST MELON

The best melon has deep green stripes (or is fully green) and should be heavy for its size

#### Field spot:

A creamy yellow patch indicates a watermelon full of flavour-avoid fruits with pale patches

#### Patches/webbing:

Brown dry weathering spots and vein-like webbing lines mean

#### Thump test:

When you tap on the melon, it should sound deep and hollow, meaning the fruit has more water and is likely ripe.

you've got an extra-sweet watermelon. These spots appear where sugar has been seeping out of the fruit

chillies, vegetables, and above all, watermelons.

For years now, Darshana has consistently set an unbreakable record — growing around 1,000 watermelons each season. Varying in size and price, her watermelons are so sought after that it's almost impossible to pass through Parra during summer without being urged to visit her fields.

Darshana's connection to the market began early. "When we were small, we would accompany our parents across the Chapora River by ferry — there was no bridge then — and in a way, I grew up conducting a survey of the market," she recalls. By 1992, she had formally entered the business, setting up shop at Siolim Tar. Even today, she follows the same routine — selling at Siolim Tar from Sunday to Thursday, at Mapusa market on Fridays, and at Calangute market on Saturdays.

Her family's strong ties to Siolim helped her business thrive. "Since my parents also sold produce there, I'm simply carrying forward their legacy. Now, with my own shop, it's easier," she says.

Over the years, Darshana has emerged as the foremost farmer of Bardez. Generous, hardworking, and blessed with an engaging personality that easily wins customers, she is also a passionate advocate for farmers' rights. She proudly recounts having participated in a virtual conference with Prime Minister Narendra Modi, during which she says he spoke to her as if they had known each other for years.

Agriculture remains her biggest source of income, and Darshana credits her husband and sons for supporting her at every stage. "It's been a team effort. My husband and sons have been extremely helpful in reaching this position," she says. She is equally proud that her children, despite their separate careers, make time to help her in the fields and with transportation to the markets.

Her watermelons — sweet and delicious — are in such demand that Darshana is now considering increasing her production. "Fieldwork has given my life new meaning. Though it's hard work, there's also immense contentment," she says. Each year, she earns a net profit of around Rs 6-7 lakh — about Rs 1.5-2 lakh from paddy and the rest from watermelons and other produce — a testament to her consistent dedication.

Darshana believes she is a role model, especially for young girls in Bardez, where she notices a worrying trend: while many young boys are taking up farming, girls seem to be moving away from agriculture. "That's not a good sign. If I had chosen a different career in my youth, I doubt I would have achieved this level of recognition," she reflects.

Today, Darshana's fields — and her spirit — stand tall. She remains committed to her life's work, determined to continue growing watermelons as their popularity soars year after year.

"I will keep farming as long as I can. This field has made me who I am," she concludes.

## Flight attendant loses job, builds biz with mum's pickle recipes

After flight attendant Yachika Chopra lost her job during the pandemic, she started 'Circa' in April 2021, bringing to fruition her late mother's dream to build a brand of artisanal pickles

VIDYA RAJA

A few years ago, Yachika Chopra was a rather busy flight attendant with an airline. Focused on her career, she says that she never gave much thought to anything else until April 2020 when the lockdown was announced and the world came to a standstill.

At home in Goa, without a job, Yachika stumbled upon her mother Poonam Chopra's little black book filled with recipes. That turned out to be a treasure trove for her.

Speaking to The Better India, she says, "Building a brand that sold artisanal pickles was a dream that my mother had nurtured. However, she never mustered the courage to see this plan through. Instead in the little black book, she made meticulous notes on the resources that would be needed to start a business."

Unfortunately, Yachika lost her mother in 2020.



"Circa was founded in April 2021 as a tribute to mom," says Yachika. "Never did I imagine myself being immersed in oil and spices the way I am now," she adds.

Having started with an initial investment of about Rs 20,000, Circa today fulfils between 700 to 900 orders each month.

While people were making Dalgona coffee and experimenting with making sourdough bread, Yachika and her



husband, Ray Vaz decided to do some home cleaning. "It was during this time that I found mom's diary filled with recipes. In fact, not just the recipe but she had also made notes of the health benefits of each of the ingredients that she used."

On the insistence of her husband, she decided to make a small batch of the sweet and sour green chilli pickle, to begin with. "I remember telling him that pickles were usually grandmother's domain and I didn't see myself as someone who could make pickles. It requires a lot of work and I wasn't sure I was cut out for it," she says.

The first batch that was made was distributed amongst friends and family. Almost all of them came back asking for more. "Even then I did not see myself doing it. I told people how it took me the entire day to make one batch and I wasn't ready for all that work again. But they kept insisting and I made it again. This time I was brave enough to attempt two flavours (sweet and sour chilli and carrot cauliflower)," she adds.

She recalls how the smell while making the first batch transported her back to her childhood. Yachika describes her mom as someone who seemed like she had 20 hands when in the kitchen.

The second batch was also distributed at lightning speed. Around this time a community

exhibition came up and Yachika took up a stall there. "The process of sourcing sustainable packaging for the pickles, getting

for the masala to be cooked and ready and thereafter a certain period to mature, which ranges from 65 to 15 days."

What makes the pickles taste different are the small tweaks that she has seen her mother incorporate. She says, "We do not use the regular detergent to wash the utensils that we make the pickles in. Instead, we use all-natural cleaning products. Even the amount of salt I add is moderate."

Sometime in September 2020, Yachika recalls she got a call from the airline to resume work but seeing how much she had started enjoying building Circa, she chose to give that up and continue as an entrepreneur. "By then I started seeing good potential in building the brand and that was such an exciting proposition for me. Perhaps this was a latent talent that I never tapped into," she says with a laugh.

"The plan is to eventually build an all-woman team to help scale this company," she says. (Edited by Yoshita Rao)

The time taken to make each pickle varies. She explains, "The lemon pickle takes 65 days to mature, which means I can bottle it only once that time lapses. The green chilli is made with a particular variety and to source that is a laborious task. The other pickles require a minimum of three days

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