

GOA, MONDAY, JUNE 23, 2025

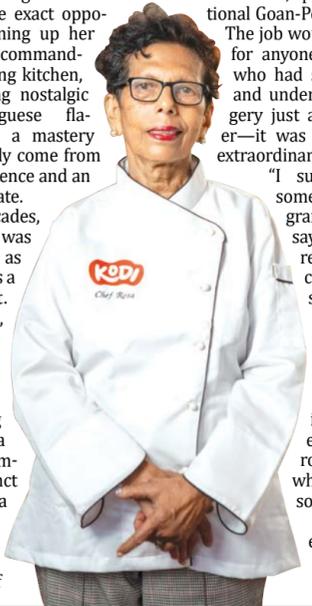
At 74, Rosa Margaret Pacheco finds her calling in a restaurant kitchen

Retired pharmacist, stroke survivor, and now head chef, Rosa is stirring up a new chapter - one rich with ancestral Goan-Portuguese recipes

ANISHA FRANCIS
anisha@herald-go.com

BENAULIM: At an age when most people are content to slow down and ease into retirement, 74-year-old Rosa Margaret Pacheco is doing the exact opposite—buttoning up her chef's coat, commanding a bustling kitchen, and reviving nostalgic Goan-Portuguese flavours with a mastery that can only come from lived experience and an evolved palate.

For decades, Rosa was known not as a chef but as a pharmacist. And yet, those who tasted her food always sensed something special—a near alchemical instinct for masala proportions, and the gentle balance of



spices. Still, cooking remained a passion tucked quietly into the margins of her life.

That changed this year, when Rosa took up her first official role as head chef at a new restaurant in Benaulim, specialising in traditional Goan-Portuguese cuisine. The job would be demanding for anyone, but for Rosa—who had survived a stroke and undergone bypass surgery just a few years earlier—it was nothing short of extraordinary.

"I suppose this was something I was programmed to do," she says, seated in the restaurant's breezy courtyard, the scent of fried fish and slow-simmering kodi in the air. "My parents ran a successful hotel in Vasco back in the Portuguese era. I grew up surrounded by cooks whipping up wholesome, rustic dishes." The family kitchen was never separate from the hotel kitchen, she

recalls, laughing. "All our meals came from there. Ironically, I never really learned to cook back then. My father wanted me to, of course. He believed that every girl should know her way around a kitchen. But I was stubborn—I wanted to be a pharmacist."

She pursued that dream with grit, earning her degree and eventually landing a job at a pharmacy. But even as she found her footing in the medical field, she couldn't ignore the quiet pull of the kitchen. Seeing cooking as a vital life skill, she enrolled in a one-year course in catering at the Food Craft Institute in Porvorim.

"I was the only girl in the class," she says. "I even tried my luck at Oberoi's, hoping to work in the kitchen. But the industry was very male-dominated at the time, and I was warned about the rough, rowdy boys and long hours. So I went back to pharmacy."

Years passed. Rosa married, had a son, and eventually helped set up a hospital pharmacy in Margao, where she worked well into her 60s. Everything seemed steady—



until 2017, when she suffered a stroke.

"I remember waking up and feeling an odd numbness. I knew something was wrong," she recalls. "I woke Jude—my son—who had just pulled an all-nighter at work and asked him to drive me to Aster Hospital, where I worked. I walked in myself. After an MRI, they diagnosed it as a stroke."

Thanks to early detection, recovery was swift. But a few months later, Rosa had to undergo bypass surgery for a heart blockage. Even then, she returned to work after a brief rest. It was only when the Covid-19 lockdown hit that she finally chose to retire—reluctantly.

Meanwhile, her son Jude had begun making waves in the hospitality industry, running restaurants and organising events. "He would often come to me for my ancestral recipes—sorpotel, Goan stew, choris pulao—all the classics," she says. "I had written them down carefully, just like I had seen them made in our hotel kitchen growing up."

Eventually, an idea took root. Jude, along with his friend and business partner Orville Andrade, planned to open a fish thali restaurant in Benaulim. They needed someone who could bring authenticity to the menu—someone who knew not just the recipes, but the soul behind them.

"For me, it was a no-brainer," Rosa says. "I was getting bored at home. When they asked, I jumped at the chance. Some of my friends thought I was mad—starting a new job at 74? But honestly, I feel younger now than I have in years."

Rosa spent two months training the kitchen team from scratch, teaching them not just techniques but principles—like why coconut milk should always be freshly extracted by hand, or how certain seasonal condiments add zing to a caldean. There are no shortcuts in her kitchen. Everything is made the old-fashioned way and cleanliness is top priority.

Just before the restaurant's

launch came a make-or-break moment: a massive catering order for the popular Christmas Waltz event in Verna. "We had to make 12 different items—croquettes, rissois, sandwiches, stew, forminhas—you name it. Between 500 and 900 pieces of each! We worked around the clock. But when the food flew off the shelves, I knew I still had it in me."

Today, the restaurant is gaining a quiet but loyal following, thanks to Rosa's repertoire of heritage dishes. The prawn and fish kodi (curry) with coconut milk remain a favourite, along with her choris pulao and roulades. Guests often tell her the food tastes like home—a nostalgic reminder of Sunday lunches and family feasts. "That's what keeps me going," Rosa says. "It's a different kind of medicine, I suppose. When I'm working, my arthritis doesn't bother me. I don't feel tired. My mind is sharp, focused. At home, I get lazy. But here, in this kitchen, I feel alive."

Not everyone gets to realise their passion in their seventh decade—but Rosa Pacheco isn't just anyone.

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 Herald'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 Herald'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.

THE WORLD'S THEIR OYSTER: Chopdem sisters Maya and Priya secure their future selling Goa's beloved kalvam

ERWIN FONSECA

MAPUSA: Seafood has always been a staple for Goans—an essential part of their diet and identity. But behind the plates of succulent seafood lies the labour of countless workers. While traditional fishermen often get the spotlight for spending their lives at sea, another class of seafood workers rarely receives the recognition they deserve—those who work not on boats, but among clams and shellfish, preparing delicacies like kalvam (oysters) for the market.

And few do it with as much dedication and pride as Priya Shirodkar and Maya Gawandi, two sisters from Agarwada-Chopdem in Pernem, who have been quietly running a small, self-made kalvam business for the last 15 years.

“We're proud that we don't depend on anyone and have built our own small business. It may be only for six months a year, but it has brought us a good living. We'll continue working here in Chopdem for as long as our health allows and circumstances remain favourable. We may be the last generation doing this, but we want others to continue. These jobs are part of our culture —Priya Shirodkar

Originally from Agarwada and now married and settled in Arambol, the sisters spend six months each year—January through June or mid-July—sitting by the roadside in Chopdem, cleaning and selling kalvam. Their work, though seasonal, is a lifeline for their families. "Life hasn't been easy for us," says Priya, "but we've never let the struggles break us. We've built something of our own."

Though roadside vendors like them are often vulnerable to being evicted by authorities, the Chopdem Panchayat has provided them with an NOC to continue working. "We believe there's a divine hand guiding us," says Priya, resolute.

The sisters grew up surrounded by farming work and household responsibilities. Their connection to kalvam goes back to childhood, when their grandmother would bring home piles of clams from the nearby Chapora River and



clean them with care. "As kids, we would watch her with fascination. Back then it was just excitement and entertainment for us," recalls Maya. "We didn't know then that this would become our livelihood."

Years later, with family expenses piling up and jobs hard to come by, Priya decided to revive the skill she learned from her grandmother. "Every election, politicians promise jobs for at least one person in each family. But basic jobs—even as cleaners—are not given to us," says Priya. "We know families with two or three brothers in government jobs. That's the injustice. Politicians pass by us in fancy cars, ignoring us now—but they'll remember us when elections come around."

That frustration became fuel for action. "We decided to stop depending on anyone and to stand on our own feet,"

says Priya. She started the business on her own and later brought Maya in. "The kalvam season lasts only till the heavy rains start, but in those six months, we manage to sustain our families."

They buy the full catch directly from fishermen. "If there's no other buyer, we take the entire boat's catch. Initially it was difficult, but now we manage," explains Priya. And their fresh, roadside cleaning setup draws a loyal crowd. "Whatever we clean gets sold the same day," she adds. "Kalvam is a delicacy—it depends on how it's cooked, but people love it."

The clam shells are not wasted either; they're collected by others and used to make lime powder (chuno) and paste (lami), giving the business a zero-waste edge.

For the sisters, this isn't just about money—it's about preserving tradition. "Traditional Goan jobs are disappearing," says Maya. "Yes, education is important, but our young people think jobs like this are beneath them. Eventually, migrants will take over these professions because our own girls won't want to do it."

They urge Goans to stay connected to such work. "We may be the last generation doing this, but we want others to continue. These jobs are part of our culture," they say in unison.

When the season ends in July, the sisters return to household duties and farming work. "It's not a year-round job, but it's ours. We've built something for ourselves," says Priya. "We've earned respect and good customers. Yes, the heat can be tough in summer—but we enjoy our work and will continue doing it as long as our health allows."

The cycle of life: In changing times, this Aldona mechanic stays true to his craft

In a world that often chases trends and titles, Rohidas Mandrekar is a quiet reminder that dignity lies not in how glamorous a job appears, but in the honesty, skill, and purpose with which it is done

JENIFER FERNANDES
joseph@herald-go.com

ALDONA: In a quiet corner of Aldona, 67-year-old Rohidas Mandrekar continues to spin the wheels of his humble yet dignified legacy — repairing bicycles and performing basic two-wheeler maintenance. What began in the early 1980s as a simple job to help his family survive has today become a lifetime of purpose, perseverance, and pride in traditional work.

Rohidas's journey started in 1983 with just a handful of rented bicycles and a keen eye for cycle repair. "It was a humble beginning," he recalls. "But every broken chain, every flat tyre taught me something." Slowly and steadily, he sharpened his skills and saved enough to set up a proper cycle repair shop — a place where, even today, he works with dedication.

From overhauling old steel-framed cycles to adjusting modern gear systems and fixing disc brakes, Rohidas handles it all with quiet confidence. "Cycling has changed," he says, "but my commitment to quality service has not." His workshop is more than just a repair stop — it is a symbol of self-reliance, where each cycle leaves safer, smoother, and ready for the road.

He recalls the early days when a new cycle cost just Rs 100. "They were heavy, sturdy, and simple — no gears or fancy parts. But they had a charm of their own," he smiles. Today's bicycles, he notes, are sleek, technologically advanced, and even come with electric assist. "They've become symbols of fitness and leisure more than necessity."

Indeed, the very meaning of the cycle has shifted. Once the most accessible mode of transport — often the only one in a household — bicycles were central to daily life. Now, with modern conveniences and rising affluence, they're seen more as lifestyle tools. "People used to pedal because they had no choice. Today, they pedal for good health," he observes.

But Rohidas isn't just a cycle mechanic. His story is

deeply woven into the socio-cultural shifts of Goa. He left school after Class 4, forced into work at the age of 11 when his father passed away. His elder brother was the only breadwinner at the time, and Rohidas stepped in to share the weight. "It wasn't easy, but it was necessary," he reflects.

He started small — tending cows, helping his mother in the fields, and eventually working in a hotel. "There was a mechanic nearby. Every day, I'd take him tea and quietly watch him work," he says. One day, he asked to learn. The mechanic agreed — but without pay. "That didn't matter to me. Learning the skill was more valuable than money."

Eventually, he opened a small store and began renting cycles. Business boomed — until motorbikes entered the scene and changed the game. He adapted, shifted focus to repairs, and found his true calling. "I used to rent a cycle for 25 paise per hour. It sounds small now, but it helped me stand on my own feet."

He even tried his hand at farming once, investing time, effort, and money — but the returns were disheartening. "There are barely any fields left to work on now," he says. Farming, like many traditional livelihoods, is struggling to survive.

Today, Rohidas believes that you can still build a sustainable life through traditional skills — but only if you're willing to work hard and do it yourself. "You can't succeed if you rely on hiring someone else to do your job. You have to be hands-on."

His observations about changing mindsets are pointed. "Many Goans



don't want to do this kind of work anymore. They say there are no jobs, but they refuse the ones that exist — ones we used to do with pride." Instead, he sees migrants filling these roles, building steady livelihoods while locals chase salaried jobs that often pay less.

"There's no shame in honest work," he says firmly. "Traditional occupations have dignity. If we keep ignoring them, we'll lose not just our culture, but also our independence."

Rohidas knows the trade-offs of chasing greener pastures and prefers the life of an entrepreneur. "In Goa, I have freedom. I'm my own boss. If I want to step out for five minutes, I don't need permission. That kind of independence is priceless."

Rohidas also feels deeply for the younger generation. He urges children to learn traditional skills, but says many shy away. "They don't want to dirty their clothes or get grease on their hands. But business comes with hard work, loss, and risk. You have to earn success — no shortcuts."

He still sources materials from Mapusa and laments the declining quality of modern cycles. "Earlier, the brakes were strong, parts lasted years. Now, even a new cycle rusts quickly. I had a cycle that lasted 35 years — it still looks new today."

For Rohidas, the lesson is clear: value your roots, and don't be afraid of working with your hands. "Instead of running after jobs, start something of your own," he says. "You may not wear a suit, but you'll stand tall with pride. The satisfaction of building something — with your own two hands — is far more rewarding than any salary slip."