

Rani Force – Marie Antoinette’s Bake Shoppe

This is Kansas Profile. I’m Ron Wilson, director of the Huck Boyd National Institute for Rural Development at Kansas State University.

“Happy mistakes.” That sounds like an oxymoron – a contradiction in terms. But “happy mistakes” is one way of describing the experience of a woman who was seeking a better diet for her daughter and ended up developing a new business. It’s today’s Kansas Profile.

Rani Force is the owner and head baker at Marie Antoinette’s Gluten-Free Bake Shoppe. Rani grew up in a farming area of Michigan where she cooked and baked in the kitchen with her mother. Rani got married and became a mother herself and later moved to St. Joseph, Missouri.

In 2010, her 11-year-old daughter started exhibiting major symptoms of illness. The daughter experienced dizziness, vomiting, daily migraines, lethargy, and imbalance. Her doctors were baffled. The family went to specialist after specialist.

One day while sitting in yet another doctor’s waiting room, Rani happened to glance at a medical journal article about eating gluten-free. The symptoms of gluten-intolerance sounded a lot like her daughter’s. Rani described this to the doctor who agreed to let them try a gluten-free diet until her next appointment.

“In a matter of days, my daughter’s condition improved,” Rani said. That was a breakthrough, but it was still a challenge to find foods which would work in her daughter’s diet. Furthermore, it turned out her daughter also had allergies to yeast and corn. Rani began actively seeking foods that her daughter could consume.

When their older daughter graduated from Wellesley, Rani and her family went back east and visited gluten-free bakeries along the way but with disappointing results. “As I sat and tried to choke down a tasteless, dry, and crumbly gluten-free cupcake in Boston, I knew we could offer a more tasty, moist, and sweet cupcake,” Rani said.

Through trial and error, Rani began developing gluten-free recipes of her own. Her daughter’s eyes would light up at the sight of cupcakes and cookies which she could consume. “We figured if our family had this problem, we couldn’t be alone,” Rani said. Rani decided to open a bakery to serve this need.

Using a logo of a pretty, young Marie Antoinette, the drawing of which resembled their daughter, Rani and her husband opened Marie Antoinette’s Gluten-Free Bake Shoppe. They located the shop in the nearby rural community of Wathena, Kansas, population 287 people. Now, that’s rural.

“I love Wathena,” Rani said. “It reminds me of the farm country where I grew up in Michigan.” Rani’s husband developed the graphics and filmed commercials for the store.

The bake shoppe menu has broadened beyond gluten-free products as people learned that there could be alternative recipes for other popular foods as well. “We now specialize in allergy-free cooking,” Rani said.

The menu includes breakfast and lunch items as well as cookies, cakes, cupcakes, and holiday treats. Marie Antoinette’s also caters parties and special events. The company is having K-State food scientists analyze its foods for nutritional value as the company prepares its products for shipment and delivery. Already, visitors have sought

out Marie Antoinette's from across the country. For example, the bake shoppe has had customers from Ohio, Virginia, Texas and California.

Rani continues to develop new allergen-free products. One was what her husband called a "happy mistake."

"I was trying to make a (gluten-free) donut recipe, but it looked like cinnamon roll dough instead of donuts," Rani said. "I tried it that way and I've had people say these are the best cinnamon rolls they've ever had," she said.

Not only has this venture helped Rani's family diet and created a business, it has been personally rewarding. "It is really nice when people say things like, 'This is the first time I've been able to have a birthday cake for my daughter,'" Rani said.

For more information, go to www.mariesglutenfree.com.

"Happy mistakes." That's what Rani's family calls it when she discovers an alternative use for a recipe that can benefit those with food allergies. We commend Rani Force and all those involved with Marie Antoinette's Gluten-Free Bake Shoppe for making a difference with creative entrepreneurship in the kitchen. Rural Kansas needs more entrepreneurs like this, make no mistake about that.

For the Huck Boyd National Institute for Rural Development, this is Ron Wilson with Kansas Profile.