



MADE IN SIKKIM, OF SIKKIM

maato

Deeply rooted in Sikkim's natural heritage (vis a vis the red clay of the Kitam hills), Studio MAATO's delicately hand-crafted potterywares are fast making their way into Sikkim's cultural heritage too – shaping beauty and elegance out of local craftsmanship.

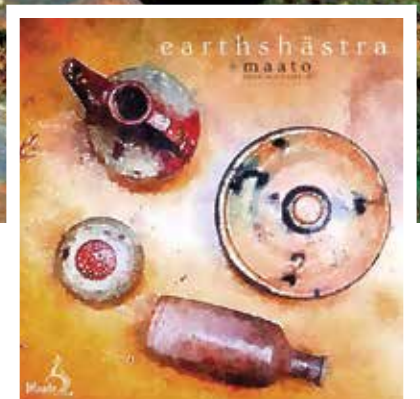
by PAYAL SINGH

If you ever happen to chance a visit to Studio MAATO, nestled among the sunny folds of the Kitam hills in South Sikkim, the disarmingly warm welcome of your hosts is not the only thing that will beckon you inside. Through the open doors, the first thing that will catch your eye is an elegant iron cut-out of

the 'MAATO' logo on the rear wall of the one-storied structure – quietly assuring you that you've come to the right place.

Walk right in and your eyes are greeted by what can only be termed as the 'MAATO Wall of Fame'. Covered from top to bottom with rows of wooden shelves, the

wall proudly displays the studio's meticulous creations for all to see – some fresh off the wheel and still damp, some hot out of the kiln and others all glazed and gleaming, ready for delivery! From the wall, it is only a step out into the studio's backyard wherein lies the genesis of each MAATO piece.





COVERED FROM TOP TO BOTTOM ARE THE STUDIO'S METICULOUS CREATIONS FOR ALL TO SEE



THE WHAT AND WARE OF MAATO

Born of the rich, red clay of the Kitam hills and delicately hand-crafted by local artisans, MAATO potterywares are quietly making their presence felt among the overwhelming flourish of mass-produced, factory-made souvenirs, crockery and other household items flooding the Sikkimese markets. A tough competition since the latter is cheaper and easier to source, but changing mindsets, evolving aesthetics and the

fierce Sikkimese sentiment to protect local culture and arts does is slowly but surely paving the way for places like Studio MAATO to exist and flourish in the state.

Retailed from the studio (off the shelf and as on-order), MAATO products are also available at Rachan Books/ Café Fiction in Gangtok, and at Konyak store in Guwahati's Uzan Bazaar. They will soon also be stocked at the upcoming Sikkim Organic Boutique in New Delhi's Greater Kailash area.

Over the last few years, MAATO products have also been showcased at festivals such as the Namchi Mahotsav and Gangtok's Winter Carnival.

At the moment, MAATO has three distinct product lines. You can choose from its functional household items which include utility wares such as tea sets, napkin holders, spoon rests, soup bowls, ashtrays, incense holders, candle stands and an array of crockery, tableware and bath accessories designed with special attention to user convenience and detail. Next, the

subject-specific souvenirs are usually tabletop or wall-mounted ceramic plates and tiles hand-painted, carved or inscribed with Sikkimese motifs or as per customer specifications, as well as customised bottles, hip flasks and the popular piggy banks and hand impressions on clay. Finally, art objects and ceramic installations such as murals and tile works are for a specific market or demand.

The functional household items targeted mainly at the local and regional market are priced affordably, since they are also produced in relatively higher volumes, between Rs 100 to Rs 800. The souvenirs usually hand-painted and involve more work can cost anywhere between Rs 1,000 to Rs 5,000. The installations, murals and other art pieces, usually unique, customized pieces made only on order, are priced varyingly.



REENA RAI AT HER STUDIO IN SOROK,
KITAM NEAR NAMCHI

THE WOMAN BEHIND MAATO

Studio MAATO is owned and run by 36-year-old Reena Rai, who conceptualizes, designs and creates MAATO's potterywares. She has a support staff of four, including two women who she trained, helps her with the production.

For Reena, the oldest daughter of Kamal K Rai and Kuma Rai of Gangtok, the journey into the world of pottery began in 2007, while teaching kindergarten at her alma mater, Tashi Namgyal Academy, Gangtok. Prior to this, Reena had briefly worked as an interior designer – she studied Interior Design at Exteriors Interiors Institute in Kolkata after her Bachelor of Arts from Loreto College there.

“Teaching was a wonderful experience, but I felt the need to do something more. Self-sustenance appealed to me, especially during a trip to the United States where I visited an Amish community and saw their way of life, simple and sustainable,” she says.

After working as an interior





designer, Reena had also realised the lack of indigenously crafted items in Sikkimese homes: “We have such amazing craftwork in Sikkim – wood carving, carpet weaving, bamboo and straw weaving – but due of lack of patronage, these crafts are, despite their richness, fast losing out to mass-produced imported items. It is very difficult to even get a basket weaver in the villages these days! I felt the need to do something to help further our craft industry, and pottery being a fairly new medium, held challenges but also a lot of possibilities.”

Reena left her teaching job and enrolled for a Master Potter course in a pottery village in Khanapur located on the Goa-Maharashtra-Karnataka border.

After her course, Reena moved to Goa to learn the beautiful Azulejos, Portuguese tile painting. She returned to Sikkim in 2008 and started working from a small rented apartment near Kitam Bazaar. By mid 2008, she had her first production ready for sale –ceramic souvenir plates and decorative tiles hand-painted with Sikkimese landmarks and its flora and fauna. “Produced as limited editions, they were received really well both by local buyers and visitors – felt good as only you who know how much of your time, mind and body is invested in creating every single piece,” she says.

Perhaps, it was this sense of fulfillment of what she had set out to do that egged Reena on to build her own space that could house a bigger studio.

BACK TO HER ROOTS: WHERE MAATO IS BORN EVERYDAY

With firm support and encouragement from her husband, in 2011, Reena set up Studio MAATO at their newly built residence in Sorok, Kitam (about 6 km from Namchi), complete with pottery infrastructures like blunger, pot mill, gas kiln and glazing and firing equipments.

Reena explains that Kitam/Sorok, apart from its geological and climatic (Kitam’s relatively drier weather makes it conducive for pottery) advantages, is also where her ancestral roots lie.

“My ancestor, Phati Karna Sampang came to this village from east Nepal in 1826 and I am the seventh generation to have settled here. Maato in Nepali means ‘earth’ and it was only natural that my studio be where I come from. MAATO is a reminder of our mortality yet containing within it the promises of life and hope.” The MAATO logo is the silhouette of a stupa, embodying the five elements of being – earth, fire, water, air and ether.

Reena further adds that the idea behind starting her venture in a rural area is her intent to help empower the local community, especially the women. With support from the government, Reena has trained over 20 women in the area, many of whom worked with her afterwards – two of them still are.

“It is often claimed that women were the first potters. Maria Martinez who is one of the great matriarchs of the Pueblo pottery, is an inspiration to me. The Pueblos are a native American tribe in southwest United States and Pueblo pottery dates back to around 2800 BC,” she explains.

STUDIO POTTERY: THE JOYS AND THE CHALLENGES

Reena’s favourite part of the various processes that go into crafting each of MAATO’s pieces is one which most potters will nod at in agreement – wheel throwing, which involves taking the wet clump of clay and transforming it into the shape you want on the wheel.

“It’s almost therapeutic to see the wet clay transform into a defined shape within seconds! I do it nearly everyday, but it never ceases to fascinate me each time. I also love the



IS IT A BOWL? IS IT A CUP? NO, IT'S A PIGGY BANK! THESE ADORABLE CUSTOMIZED PIGGY BANKS THAT COME IN A RANGE OF ATTRACTIVE COLOURS, INCLUDING CERAMIC WARE'S QUINTESSENTIAL CELADON GREEN, ARE THE MOST POPULAR OF MAATO'S PRODUCTS.



thrill of creating new designs. At the moment, I am working with cherry blossom motif. With cherry trees bursting into bloom all around me, working on this motif makes me feel at one with my natural surrounding – I could not ask for more!” shares Reena.

It is also the space studio pottery, as it is called, offers in terms of exploring new ideas, pushing boundaries and experimenting with form, techniques and material that keeps Reena firmly ‘at the wheel’, so to say.

Reena works on two mediums - earthen ware and white ware. While the earthenware from the clay from the studio's backyard is used mostly for decorative and few functional items, the white clay sourced from Kolkata and Mumbai are used mostly for tableware since it is of high temperature body and is completely microwave safe. “We do not use any lead-based glazes – all the glazes we

use are non-toxic and safe. We try and test all our products before we put it up for sale. Working with different types of clay body, glaze mixes, and firing techniques can be very challenging, so many experiments take place at the studio. It is a lengthy process yet a fulfilling one,” Reena explains.

Of course, she admits that since it is a very niche sector in Sikkim, the fun does not come without its share of hurdles.

“Unlike other local enterprises, pottery has the disadvantage of being relatively ‘unfamiliar’ at the moment at least, though it has huge market potential. Also, with everything online today, people have access to anything from any part of the world – which means we are competing with a global competition of a more experienced and established ceramic market. Thankfully, perceptions are changing – and I am grateful to all my patrons for their encouragement which motivates me to do better.

Meanwhile, the challenge for us is to keep focusing on the quality and uniqueness of our products and the very idea behind MAATO – giving people a part of Sikkim they can take with them, quite literally,” she says.

By next year, Reena will also be setting up a second studio in Pakyong in East Sikkim, where she plans to hold pottery workshops for children and adults: “We have received a lot of requests for workshops which will also enable us to help people understand and promote the art form.”

There is a woman behind every man's success – and behind this woman's success is a man: “My husband is my perfect partner. He has been supportive right from the beginning and is my constant guide. He helps out, whenever he can, with design, glazing and firing. The fact that despite a fulltime job, he has taken the time and effort to learn about what I do means a whole lot. He's also a doting father – with my

son and daughter, still in their early years of childhood, around, there's chaos pretty much all the time, but he has been great helping me find the time I need for my work."

"My family has been very supportive – my parents were patient with what I was trying to do, and my sisters, well, they are my pillars of strength and my best critics!" Reena adds.

Finally, our parting question: her advice to youngsters in Sikkim? "Living in a village for seven years now has made me a little less idealistic than before. I'd say to the younger generation, understand, embrace and celebrate your roots, your heritage, your identity. Also, it is important to work for the things that give you a sense of gratification and self-worth. Things may be easy today but they may not be forever. Most of all, enjoy what you do."



Apart from Rachna Books/Café Fiction in Gangtok, you can also look out for Studio MAATO products at the upcoming Winter Carnival in Gangtok.

For queries/ orders:

Email: maato.sikkim@gmail.com

Call: +91 9564913557

You can also follow Studio MAATO on Facebook for updates on new products and offerings.

Innovation is not a random act. It is the outcome of a habit.

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BEING ANNA

There's what you love to do and then there's what you can't help but do. Anna Lingkit Foning chose to be an Engineer, but writing-reading were always in her genes – she is, after all, the granddaughter of AR Foning, author of the celebrated book, 'Lepcha, My Vanishing Tribe'. Luckily, for Anna, life has brought together the two to give her a dream career which weaves in her chosen field of study and experience – in Science – with her love and a natural affinity for all things books – through publishing.

THE BEGINNING

Being open to new opportunities and evolving with them was something that Anna, daughter of SK Foning and late GR Foning, learned since school. After moving school from St Joseph's Convent in Kalimpong to Holy Cross School in Tadong (in the wake of the Darjeeling riots in the 80s), Anna went on a self rediscovery of sorts.

“The change of school and environment did me good. Coming from a girls' school to a co-educational one helped me develop a sense of co-existence with the other sex. I learned to work harder and have more confidence as an individual. I explored my horizons, I wanted to see and test what I was good/bad at. Earlier, I used to be an average student. At Holy Cross, I started playing sports and got really good at athletics and basketball. I also found out that I had a knack for debating, I found my voice and I wasn't afraid to raise my opinions. My new confidence helped me enhance my leadership skills.”

Meet the 38-year-old Manager of Customer Services at global publishing service company, Thomson Digital's New York office. Thomson Digital provides publishing services for some of the top publishing houses in the world, including Elsevier, Oxford University Press, Wiley, LWW, McGraw Hill and Random House. Based in New York, Anna manages the editorial team there along with project management, handling customer services for the company's New York clients and developing new businesses. The services include editing raw manuscripts, creating visuals and illustrations, typesetting and finally presenting the print-ready files for print or e-publishing. The publications

at Thomson Digital are primarily scientific, technical and medical publications – which is where Anna's background as a trained engineer and her interest in science comes in handy.

Thomson Digital has a unit in Gangtok – which is where Anna started her journey with the company. As for her career, it started with engineering – her first love. Now, people might ask, why would she give up a promising career as an engineer and switch to a, er, humanities field? Well, in Anna's words: “One must go with the flow and grab opportunities along the way and not let them slip by. You never know where life will take you. Not every opportunity may help you succeed but you never know which will be the stepping stone to rise ahead if you don't try.” We agree.



At Holy Cross School, Anna went on to set new records, including the landmark one of becoming the school captain against the school's rule that a student had to be studying there from the beginning to qualify for the captaincy!

ANNA THE ENGINEER

In college, Anna studied Mechanical Engineering from Regional Engineering College (now NIT) in Silchar, Assam, which she graduated with first class. It seemed the ideal choice since Physics and Mathematics have always been her favourite subjects, apart from English, of course. Afterwards, Anna took a Java course from NIIT Darjeeling and one in Oracle from SSi in Gangtok, in pursuit of her desire to work in the United States. "I wanted to work there, see that part of the world, explore and live the American dream! And any engineer with Java and Oracle qualification had an advantage," she says.

Just as she was completing

her Oracle course in December 2001, Anna saw a job advert for trainee engineers for Sikkim Time Corporation Ltd. (SITCO). She applied and got the job! At SITCO, Anna spent a successful four-year stint as a trainee engineer for the first two months and then as an Assistant Engineer, overlooking the production shop floor, the press floor and the plating shop.

"It was exactly what I wanted, very close to my field of study and I loved the work. There were many advantages to my job profile as it was not restricted only to production, but I learnt about procurement, inventory management, manpower management, budgeting, material management and, later, even product development and design. I had by then developed a deep sense of commitment to my work and wanted to do a perfect job," she says.

Anna credits her valuable

experience at SITCO to her boss at the time: "I worked under a perfectionist and I learnt so much from him. Working under him was a tall order as he was so accurate, perfect and passionate about SITCO."

When she wanted to quit her job and pursue an MBA in Finance, her boss refused to let her go until they agreed that Anna, instead of resigning, would take a two-year break and come right back to SITCO after her MBA. And come back she did, rejoining SITCO as a Manager now.

Before that, during her MBA, Anna lost her mother, an insurmountable tragedy that she describes as the toughest and most trying phase of her life: "At a certain point then, I did not want to go back and complete my MBA. Then, somehow, I found the strength to carry on – I wanted her to be proud of me." She graduated with first class.

"Hard work pays! Work for yourself and be passionate about what you do"

After SITCO shut down in 2010, Anna worked for a while as a lecturer at a management institute, teaching Economics and Marketing. “All these different experiences have added on to my confidence, they have taught me much more than any class could ever teach. Most importantly, they taught me soft skills which are never actually taught anywhere,” she adds.

ANNA THE PUBLISHER

Thomson Digital then happened in 2012, when it was planning a unit in Gangtok and was looking for people. Anna, in her go-getter approach to things, decided to give it a go. Within a few weeks, she was working at the company’s office in Noida.

Of course, the sector being a relatively new one, Anna had to start at the bottom, giving herself time to know her job. “I like challenges – they are my biggest motivator. The fact that I like to learn in detail and get to the

“Making mistakes is fine as long as you learn from them.”

logic behind things, helped me orient myself with my new job and enjoy it too. The work kept me alert, well-read and I was contributing to the field of research and it felt great.”

Within a year, Anna’s hard work paid off and she was chosen to travel to the company’s global offices in Singapore, London and New York: “It just felt so great to be recognized for the hard work, it also added to my exposure and confidence.”

After nine months, in 2013, Anna returned to Gangtok where the unit was up and running. “Everything and everyone was fresh and new to the job. We were trying to prove ourselves to be one of the best production units

of Thomson Digital. With time, we picked up pace on productivity and quality. My work required me to keep flying in and out of Gangtok, most of the times to Noida and to Chennai, and once, to Frankfurt for the prestigious Frankfurt Book Fair. These experiences were also intimidating – it was a huge responsibility to represent the company. But the fact that I was chosen over some of the senior colleagues was a huge boost to my confidence.”

Apart from being closely related to her favourite subject, Science, Anna also loves the fact that her

job entails learning everyday: “It’s something else being part of the process of publishing journals that have years of research in them – journals whose manuscripts we get to read before anyone else! It’s acquiring new knowledge every day.”

With the building blocks firmly in place, Anna is now working diligently in one direction – upward. “Moving up for me also means pulling my team up along with me. I believe in a team, that’s what sports have taught me. What good is knowledge when I am the only one who has it? Ultimately with time, when I lead a larger team,



I will need people I can trust around me, people whom I know are capable of doing the task.”

Part of Anna’s plan is to return home and lead the Gangtok unit of Thomson Digital to be one of the company’s best performing units: “As the company tag line says ‘Imprint of perfection’, I definitely intent to take the Sikkim unit there.”

On what it takes to be good at this job, Anna says, “It helps tremendously if you have a science background, since the work is related to Science, Technology and Medicine. Rest comes with training and careful

this is definitely a job for you.”

On her transition from engineering to publishing, Anna says, “I am a hardcore Mechanical Engineer and I love the machines and automobiles and production shop floor. But I have come to learn and enjoy my current job. I realised that I have it in my genes – my granddad and my youngest aunt had written books and somehow writing had been a dominant gene,

work, and as I grow older, I want a desk job that would not make me run too much. I got lucky!”

When she’s not working, Anna spends her time dabbling in photography, playing sports, baking, exploring new places, listening to music, reading, doing needlework and running and hiking – all of which she finds therapeutic.

To the youngsters back in Sikkim,

“Moving up for me also means pulling my team up along with me.”



understanding of the nature of the job. It is very important to understand and listen to what the client needs and build a better way or mechanism to deliver. You need to have excellent communication skills and an open mind. It is also very important to think out of the box, to do the same thing better and smarter. If you have a knack of writing and enjoy reading,

which I guess got activated when I joined Thomson Digital!”

Anna also confesses that her career trajectory has also fulfilled her secret intent to have always wanted a field job when she was young and a desk job when she was older: “I always told myself, when I am young and have the energy for it, I’d rather do a field job that involves physical

Anna’s advice is: “Hard work pays! Work for yourself and be passionate about what you do – that will take you the whole way. And never think what you learnt in life was a waste – everything you did teaches you something. Making mistakes is fine as long as you learn from them. Be brave and no matter what life puts you through never stop fighting.”



Ma Baker!

From the decadent cheesecake to the all-time favourite chocolate cake, **Varsha Shrestha's** baked delights have become the talk of town and the bites to savour at weddings, private parties and, most of all, at her hotel, Nettle & Fern. Read how the fulltime mother-entrepreneur-baker 'takes the cake' when it comes to novelty desserts.



**VARSHA SHRESTHA
WHOSE BAKED
CREATIONS HAVE WON
THE HEARTS OF MANY**

Spend a few minutes on social media and you can witness one of the biggest trends to have caught on among Gangtokians in recent times, much to the delight and salivating mouths of the people around them – home baking! Yes, we are not talking about trained pastry chefs but people who've, well, YouTubed their way into the art of baking. While most of them are content whipping up scrumptious goodies for family and friends, a few are venturing outside their home space to help usher in a new dessert culture in Gangtok and giving many of us our first taste of world-class patisseries.

Meet Varsha Shrestha whose baked creations have won the hearts of many, many sweet-toothed Gangtokians and visitors alike. Wife of Naresh Raj Shrestha of Gangtok and mother of three-year-old Myra,



Varsha runs their family enterprise comprising of the popular Nettle & Fern hotel and grocery store, Home Depot. And Nettle & Fern is where one can step in to sample and savour Varsha's signature desserts which include different varieties of tea cakes, cheesecakes, fondant cakes and eggless and flourless cakes. Among them, Varsha informs that her blueberry cheesecakes sell like hot cakes! But her personal favourite is the classic chocolate cake. Varsha also takes orders for birthdays, weddings and private parties.

Of course, for Varsha, baking

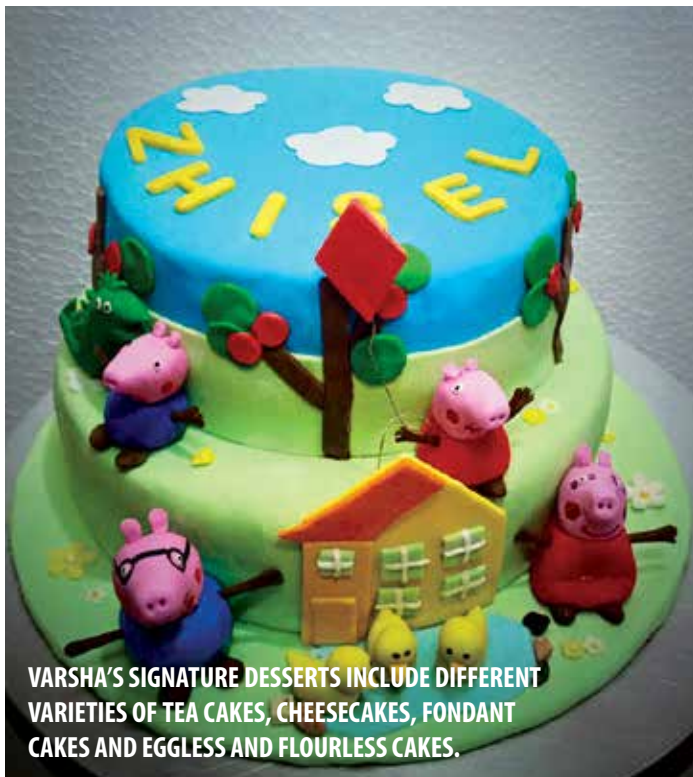
wasn't just self-taught – it was also a passion she inherited from her mother and grandmother. "I have been baking since school as both my mother and my grandmother are passionate bakers," says the alumna of Darjeeling's Loreto Convent. In fact, it was during her piano lessons in school that Varsha picked up some of her favourite recipes – from Irish magazines that belonged to Mother Padua, her piano teacher!

Kahlil Gibran once said: "Work is love made visible...if you bake bread with indifference, you bake a bitter bread that feeds but half our hunger."

And it is Varsha's love and passion for baking which truly makes her cakes special. "Nothing is difficult or impossible if you have the passion for it," she says.

Varsha also constantly keeps herself updated, reading and researching on different techniques and experimenting with different ingredients and methods to give customers the best. "I have had no formal training, whatever I have learned is through experiments and reading. I am not perfect, and I have a long way to go," she says.

Most of all, Varsha whose



VARSHA'S SIGNATURE DESSERTS INCLUDE DIFFERENT VARIETIES OF TEA CAKES, CHEESECAKES, FONDANT CAKES AND EGGLESS AND FLOURLESS CAKES.





foremost passion is being a mother to little Myra, enjoys baking for children: “Children come up with requests for different designs and that is a big challenge, but once the cake is done and I see the smile and joy on their faces, it makes it all worthwhile. In the bargain, I also learn about all the cartoon and fictional characters that are popular with the kids these days!”

We mentioned Varsha juggling her time being a mother, entrepreneur and baker. How does she do it? “My days usually start with getting to the hotel by 7.30 am to check on the breakfast spread. I then rush home to send my daughter to school. I am back at the hotel by 10.30 am, that’s when I check on the store and on the hotel rooms. I then sit with my baker to discuss the day’s menu and to try out new recipes. And unless I have a fondant cake order for delivery on the next day, I am normally home by 4 pm.”

While we can’t wait for Varsha to start her own patisserie, you can expect to see her signature desserts and cakes at Sonny’s Oasis Café on MG Marg soon.

You can also order online via her Facebook page:
<https://web.facebook.com/thecakeboutiquebyvarsha>

Varsha credits her husband’s support and encouragement as her key motivators. Apart from baking, Varsha likes to travel and try different cuisines, read and watch movies.



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