

If you've read Joanne Harris' *Chocolat* or watched Lasse Hallstrom's movie by the same name, you're familiar with the tale of Vianne Rocher, a woman who starts a chocolate store in a conservative small town in France and kicks up a storm with her indulgent offerings.

Across cities in India, women are going the Rocher way, and displaying what a little imagination and a strong entrepreneurial streak can do.

Take Chenddyna Schae, for instance. A catering student from Mumbai, she moved to Bangalore after her wedding. Two children later, she found herself

bored at home and returned to her hobby from her singleton days — chocolates. "I trained the children's nanny and together we came out with a few batches in June 2001. After much experimenting, I felt confident to explore the market," recalls the 47-year-old. So she put up a stall in Bombay Store on Bangalore's high street, M G Road, just before Diwali that year and began offering free samplers to all those who walked. She clocked great sales. A repeat act at Christmas got her not just cash but even visiting cards of executives of companies like Merrill Lynch and Citibank.

Schae discovered the huge potential of corporate orders in burgeoning Bangalore. And her business outgrew her kitchen and even an apartment she rented solely for this purpose. She's now moving into a full-fledged factory in north Bangalore, with 12 staff.

Since you must've begun receiving your stock of Diwali chocolates, look at the back of the pack. Chances are they've come from a local chocolatier. And chances are the chocolatier is a woman.

"Women have an innate sense of understanding taste and presentation. It's just something that goes beyond training," says K Laxmi, who

runs the Chocolate Hut chain in Hyderabad. Laxmi was trained by her husband Prakash Murthy, who used to work with another local company and whose job profile included training homemakers and students to make chocolates.

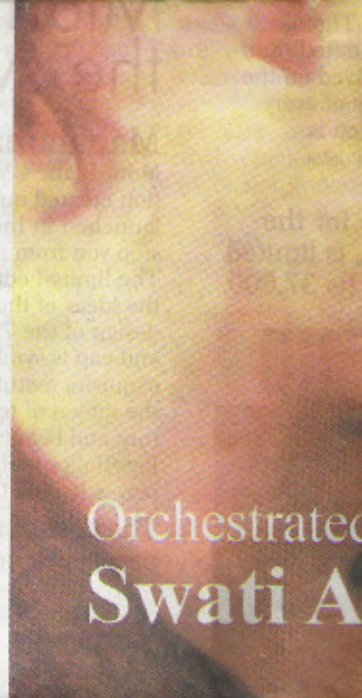
After two years of just experimenting with friends and family, the 47-year-old is pretty much the boss of what

has turned out to be a family business. Murthy takes care of the sourcing of ingredients and her elder son Karthik, an MBA, manages her retail chain and pitches to companies. And not just does she cater to festive orders

from Accenture, Airtel, Reliance, IDBI and Citibank, she also has a kiosk at Microsoft.

There are many reasons why small chocolatiers are a hit with companies, despite the presence of goliaths like Cadbury's. For one, there is a much wider variety to explore from — not just truffles, pralines and liqueur, but a whole host of innovative options like tea and cinnamon, like the ones you can find at Priti Chandriani's Chocossieur in Worli, south Mumbai. And the focus on quality ingredients that gives the taste a rich, wholesome feel. Besides, you have the freedom to make the chocolates look like those great Godivas you picked up at duty-free shops and put them in a box that reflects your corporate brand identity. Being small certainly has its advantages, but what comes with it is a set of expectations.

Reshma Sengupta (37), the owner of Open Oven on Kolkata's buzzing Camac Street and Royd Street, is expanding slowly on the retail front, and not for want of retail space. "For me quality and 24x7 monitoring is most important. That's why I don't believe in growth through the franchise model," says Sengupta, who's planning two more stores. After all, the slightest slip in



Orchestrated Swati A

In concert with
Shveta Bhag
Priyanka Da

Starring
Chenddyna
Geetanjali A



Photos by R Pavan Kumar, Debajyoti Sarkar

Chenddyna Schae

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