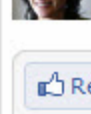


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Sneh Mehtani

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By Donna Gialanella/The Star-Ledger

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Woman in Charge

Immigrant from India has built a restaurant empire

Story By JENIFER D. BRAUN / Photos By MITSU YASUKAWA

The light from the hand-painted silk Fortuny chandelier falls softly on the jewels of the women in the crowd. At the bar, a hunk of onyx lit from within to reveal bluish veins in the stone, pretty girls pour cocktails made from grilled pineapple and chamomile syrup.

In the center of the room, next to the five-tiered cake draped in jewel-toned fondant, Sneh Mehtani is greeting her scores of guests. Wearing a glittering tunic and floor-trailing scarf, she's explaining, yet again, the name of one of her newest properties. It's a cave-like lounge, filled with black leather booths and ottomans, the kind of place you'd expect to find below 14th Street. It's actually just off the Green in Morristown. It's called SM23 -- after her son Shaun Mehtani.

"It's his initials and his birthday -- and his age, he's 23 today," she says.

The occasion is partly a birthday party for Shaun. But it is also the debut of his mother's

latest business venture, the simultaneous opening of three new properties at the Hyatt Morristown: the lounge, SM23; an Indian restaurant, Mehndi, and a pan-Asian restaurant, Ming II. (The restaurants are linked by an octagonal entry hall.)

They bring the number of restaurants run by her company to nine -- if you don't count her catering and consulting business, Your Weddings, which helps several hundred brides and grooms celebrate their nuptials every year.

Not bad for a woman who arrived in this country in 1970 with little more than a limited English vocabulary and a vague idea of becoming a makeup artist.

Called simply "Mrs." by her staff of about 100 chefs and administrators, Mehtani is Edison's answer to Martha Stewart: a woman who's turned her knowledge of how to throw a good party into a business, one that's growing by leaps and bounds even as she's handing over some responsibility for her family's fortunes to the next generation.

The family business

The Morristown restaurants (which opened Feb. 23), along with her six restaurants and headquarters along Oak Tree Road in Edison -- the epicenter of New Jersey's burgeoning South Asian community -- comprise the Mehtani Restaurant Group, a company she began in 1983 with a single restaurant. Mehtani's husband, Satish, trained as a civil engineer, now also works for the company, handling finances and construction on new restaurants. But it's clear who's in charge.

"You understand, she owns the whole thing -- not me, not my father. She owns the whole thing," says Shaun Mehtani, the newly appointed vice president of operations. A graduate of NYU's Stern School of Business -- with internships at the Ritz Carlton and Dolce & Gabbana -- Shaun recently decided, after some hesitation, to join his mother's business.

"We held negotiations, just as if it were any other business," Mehtani says. As a result of the negotiations, Shaun got a large measure of creative control over the three Morristown restaurants -- and an almost \$4 million budget to open them with.

"We could give it to him later, after we're gone -- but that's not the Indian way," Mehtani says, with a mother's indulgent smile. And she knows Shaun knows the business; he "grew up in the lobby of the Penta hotel," the site of his mother's first restaurant.

"I would go to work with her -- when I was 6, I would go with her to these multimillion-dollar weddings and she'd have me lighting candles for three hours," Shaun says. "She always kept me busy and by her side. I didn't expect her to be home with me. I went to work with her -- and she does work a lot."

Indeed, she's at her office from 10 a.m. to 10 p.m. most days, she says, and clearly has a familial relationship with her staff.

Representing her community

"I am blessed to have good people who work for me, and I work for them. Business is the place where you spend the most hours, isn't it? This is home," she Mehtani's family is originally from what is now Pakistan; her mother, pregnant with Sneh, fled across the newly formed border after the partition in the late 1940s "So I always say I was conceived in Pakistan, delivered in India and exported to the U.S.," she says, laughing.

Arriving in the United States from Delhi 37 years ago and seeking opportunity, Sneh Mehtani bounced from job to job (makeup artist, airline sales rep) until 1983, when she was already busy as a thirtysomething mom to daughter Sara and pregnant with Shaun. (She had met her husband at a family gathering; he's the son of her mother's best friend from school.)

A friend offered her the chance to open a restaurant at the Penta hotel (now the Hotel Pennsylvania) in Manhattan. She had no experience in the food industry, but at that restaurant, Moghul, she found a calling.

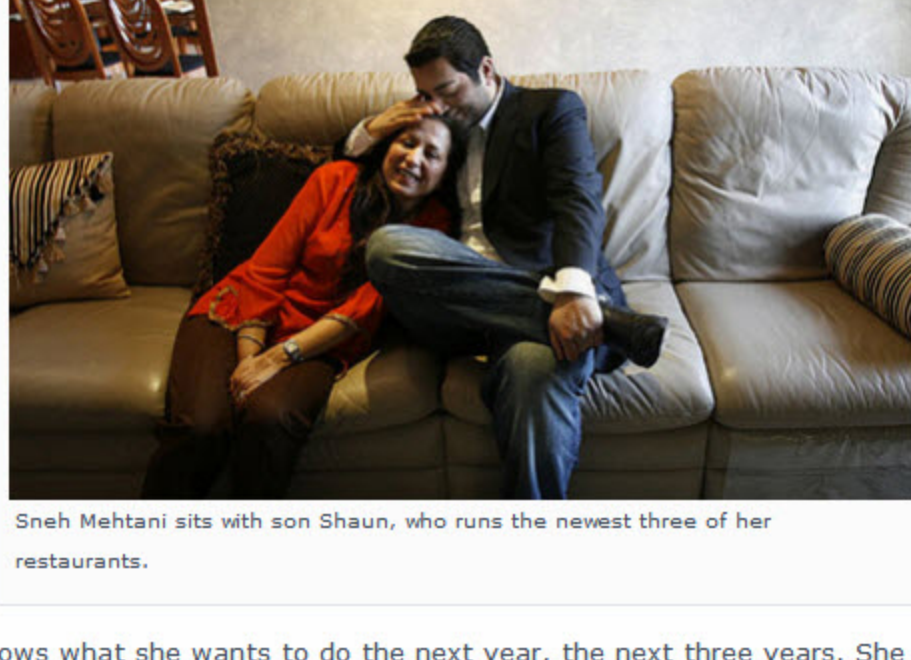
The business was a family affair almost from the start: Her mother, Savitri Bajah, watched Mehtani's children when they weren't with her. ("That's the best thing, to have Grandma living with you.") Her husband, then an insurance salesman, joined the business. They brought friends, and friends of friends, over from India to staff the kitchen; some still work with her today. Those established as head chefs get a cut of the profits their kitchens earn.

"My motivation, my passion, has always been giving strength, giving good to my community," she says. Mehtani waves a hand in the air, as if that doesn't capture what she means. "Sometimes I lose the words," she says.

Last year, the New Jersey Restaurant Association honored Mehtani with their "Gold Plate" award for exceptional service in the restaurant industry; in 30 years, Mehtani is the first Indian, and one of five women, to receive the award.

"That they would give it to a South Asian woman -- I was surprised. But I felt very good taking that award. I represented a lot of Indian restaurants, a lot of momma-poppa places. I took it on their behalf," she says.

Of course, most mom-and-pop restaurants don't expand into multi-property empires.



Sneh Mehtani sits with son Shaun, who runs the newest three of her restaurants.

"She always knows what she wants to do the next year, the next three years. She has that vision," says Danashekar Subbiah, the company's general manager -- "my general" to Mehtani.

"She's got a mind you can see working; she's a great business person, very thoughtful and deliberative," says Deborah Dowdell, president of the New Jersey Restaurant Association, for which Mehtani serves on the board of directors.

"She's very practical," Dowdell says, "and she's got phenomenal taste. And she's gorgeous."

Must be something she learned at the Christine Valmy cosmetology school -- her first career move after she arrived here at 23 years old. Fresh out of Delhi University, Mehtani landed in Fayetteville, N.C. She studied skin care in the morning and worked at a soldiers' bar in Fort Bragg at night. She got her cosmetology license, but North Carolina wasn't ready for an Indian makeup artist.

"You understand, I still had a very heavy accent, and in the southern part of the U.S. -- well, it was different at that time. I decided that I had to move to New York City."

Having established herself as a restaurateur, she moved into catering, her business fueled by the waves of second-generation Indian-Americans who were coming of age. She started with 80-person celebrations at her restaurants; today, she caters affairs of 1,000 people or more across the globe.

"It just happened. The community was growing. They came as immigrants, the '60s -- and so now, their children needed to get married." And for their weddings, they wanted food from home.

'Momma loves all her children'

Today, one of her properties in Edison, Mirage, is a catering hall; it was built to accommodate wedding clients who couldn't afford to rent a hotel ballroom. Across the street from Mirage is her commissary -- a kitchen set up just to cater affairs at hotels. The commissary kitchen centers around two imported clay tandoor ovens -- each the size of a Volkswagen. Shelves and carts are crammed with gallon buckets of rainbow-spiced -- curry, cardamom, anise. That kitchen alone, Subbiah notes, turns out upward of 60,000 meals a year. Those are just for the places held in New Jersey; for out-of-state and out-of-country events, Mehtani puts her staff on planes and ships supplies out to meet them.

These days, on any given weekend in the wedding season -- Easter through Labor Day -- Mehtani's company will be catering from four to 18 weddings. ("At this point, four is nothing," Mehtani says, waving a hand.) Even in the off-season, the business continues.

"Feb. 15 is an important date for us; the girls get the rings on Valentine's Day, they talk to their parents, and then our phones start ringing," she says.

And although she's primarily a caterer, she also helps brides and grooms with other things: where to find a mandap -- an elaborately embroidered canopy under which a Hindu wedding takes place -- in New Jersey, or what hotels in the area will accommodate a typically three-day-long Indian wedding.

As the wedding business grew, so did the number of restaurants Mehtani ran. In 1991, she opened another Moghul restaurant in Edison and then a take-out branch, Moghul Express. She now lives in Morristown, but at the time, made her home in Staten Island.

"So I went from Staten Island, to Manhattan, to Edison, every day, oh my god, for 10 years. And I had a child with me. I don't know how I did it," she says.

In 1995, when the Penta Hotel changed hands, Mehtani moved the original Moghul restaurant to Morristown. In Edison, she went on to open Mithaas, an Indian dessert cafe, Ming, a pan-Asian restaurant, and Moksha, a restaurant devoted to the lighter cuisine of Southern India. (Don't ask her to name her favorite restaurant. "A momma loves all her children the same," she demurs.)

Remembering your roots

There was never a master plan to open so many restaurants. "Every time I do a new project, I think, 'That's it!' But then the next one just happens," she says.

"Ambiance is important -- people come for the food, but they want a good ambiance," Mehtani says. To create the atmosphere at Ming, Mehtani and her general, Subbiah, made two trips to Bangkok -- to gather both inspiration and the raw materials for the restaurant's design, which she did herself. ("We never hire a designer -- after 25 years, I should know what I want," she says.)

"Just to get the idea of how it should be, we shopped in the flea markets" in Bangkok, she recalls -- sounding happy, as she does whenever she speaks of traveling, whether scooping up decor in Bangkok or hosting a wedding in Panama City.

A few weeks before the opening of the Morristown restaurants, Mehtani left her Edison offices to check on the progress of her new place. She beamed as Shaun showed a visitor the wine cellar, the computerized reservations hub -- even the waterfall installed in the bathroom, just like the one that greets visitors to the Mehtani catering hall.

"My goal is to beat her (Edison restaurants) in the Zagat's," Shaun says, grinning down at his mother.

"Yes, we are competitors now!" she says, laughing. "And if you win, I will be happy -- it means I trained you well."

Looking around from the complex's entry hall into the hive of activity all around them -- workmen in flannel-wrapped shoes painstakingly polishing the floor in the bar, bartenders mixing cardamom-infused martinis in a corner of the kitchen and wine purveyors carefully stacking \$100,000 worth of bottles into Ming II's cellar -- Shaun Mehtani wraps one arm around his mother's slim shoulders.

"Something my mother always says to me is: Tumhare maa ne gulab jamun bechke tumhe bhara kiya -- Remember, your mother raised you selling gulab jamun," Shaun says. (Gulab jamun are simple Indian sweets, deep-fried balls of dough.)

"You might talk about average covers of \$60 a person, but remember that we started selling things for a dollar. I think she wants to remind me that, two decades ago, we were nowhere."

Additional Insight:

Best business advice: "Just hire the right people. If you have good people to work with, you can do anything. And you can really enjoy your work."

Her favorite restaurant (aside from those she owns): The Copeland in Morristown.

Most unique decorating idea: Tables that double as fish tanks at her restaurant, Ming, in Edison; diners can see tiny burgundy fish swimming around under their plates as they eat.

What she does to relax: Hop a flight to London -- for the weekend.

Remaining ambition: To open boutique hotels with son, Shaun.

"Every time I do a new project, I think, 'That's it!' But then the next one just happens."

-- Sneh Mehtani

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