

Baker exhibits natural talent and approach to her craft

Sustainable bakery among EPIC exhibitors

BY ERIN MCPHEE, NORTH SHORE NEWS MAY 28, 2010



Frances Tsai, of Sweet Naturally: Natural Baked Goods, puts the finishing touches on a wedding cake that will be on display at EPIC: The Vancouver Sun Sustainable Living Expo, opening today and running until Sunday at the Vancouver Convention Centre.

Photograph by: Mike Wakefield, NEWS photo

Frances Tsai learned everything she knows about cooking from her grandmother.

"We're Chinese so we live with our grandmothers when we're young . . . and she pretty much taught me everything from . . . how to handle food to baking," says the 25-year-old.

The hours spent in the kitchen fuelled Tsai's passion for the craft. She began to build a name for herself among friends

and family who continued to call on her to cook for them. When her beloved grandmother passed away a year and a half ago, Tsai felt compelled to take things to the next level.

"Originally we were going to start a restaurant, a little café, to honour her cooking," she says. "A lot of people say the restaurant business is really, really tough and how many restaurants survive? So we thought, 'Okay, we'll start small and start with one thing,' and that's baking."

In October 2009, she opted to launch Sweet Naturally: Natural Baked Goods. More than just a producer of handmade baked goods and confections, the business is committed to the environment, seeing Tsai source out local natural and organic ingredients as well as use compostable packaging and other supplies.

This weekend, Tsai will be among the companies showcased at EPIC: The Vancouver Sun Sustainable Living Expo, a consumer tradeshow and eco-marketplace, opening today and running until Sunday at the Vancouver Convention Centre. More than 300 eco-friendly exhibitors -- from microbreweries to sustainable transportation options -- will be featured.

Sweet Naturally will be part of an eco-wedding showcase, a new addition to the annual event.

For her business, Tsai is partnered with her high school sweetheart and fiancé, Dickson Poon. Tsai does all the baking and Poon helps with ordering, marketing and other administrative duties. Three other family members act as supporters. While Tsai and Poon live in Vancouver, their operations are based in North Vancouver, seeing them rent space from The Granola King on Bowser Avenue.

They produce a variety of goods, including wedding cakes, cupcakes, scones, cookies, marshmallows, breads, fruit bars and other sweets.

As much as possible, ingredients are sourced from area farmers, mills and businesses and are always fresh. They also take into consideration what's in season.

"That's one of the (things) that sets us apart from a lot of bakers and bakeries out there," says Tsai. "Not only do we use organic ingredients, we try to use ingredients that are from B.C."

They don't use any artificial sweeteners, preservatives, food colouring or stabilizers. Their approach results in them getting special orders for individuals with specific dietary requests -- for example, those looking for gluten-free or vegan desserts -- which they're happy to fill.

To further reduce their eco-footprint, they use unbleached compostable baking cups, papers and packaging.

Sweet Naturally products are available through their website, as well as at Drive Organics in Vancouver and North Vancouver's Organics at Home. They take orders for parties and events, as well as in the summer, appear at farmers markets, including Ambleside, Burnaby and Organics at Home.

They're pleased with the opportunity to be featured at EPIC as they're endeavouring to lead by example, encourage their peers to follow suit as well as show the public the difference sourcing local sustainable ingredients makes.

"We just want to give people a green alternative," says Poon.

For more information on Sweet Naturally, visit www.sweetnaturally.ca.

EPIC: The Vancouver Sun Sustainable Living Expo will be held May 28-30 in the new Vancouver Convention Centre west building. Hours are as follows: 1-8 p.m. today, 11 a.m. to 7 p.m. tomorrow and 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. on Sunday. For tickets, \$15/\$10/\$12/\$7 or more information, visit www.epicvancouver.com.

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