GO FOR IT: Meet the three finalists in our Scotswoman of the Year awards who are fighting for glory in our business category

Bank boss said shop idea was like a 'mad bazaar' ... but we knew Glasgow women better than him!

Lesley is a super-saleswoman for city

SHEILA HAMILTON meets the three finalists in the business section of the Scotswoman of the Year awards, sponsored by TSG. They are Arti Poddar, of Lambhill Care Homes; Fiona Hamilton and Alison Fielding, of Fifi & Ally; and Lesley Sawers, chief executive of Glasgow Chamber of Commerce. The winner will be announced at a gala dinner on January 31

FIFI & ALLY
STYLE QUEENS

IT'S what every woman obviously wants, judging by the regular queues outside Fifi & Ally's Cupping Salon in Princes Square: somewhere to meet your chums, enjoy a cappuccino or glass of wine and sink your teeth into a lavender meringue.

Afterwards, you can indulge in a bit of gentle retail therapy of the more luxurious and unusual kind without having to stray too far.

It's all so stylish... and so right.

"Women get it," says Fiona Hamilton. She's the Fifi of the partnership – her cousin, Alison Fielding, is the Ally – and they founded the cafe/restaurant together in 2005.

"It's for everyone from your grannies, to mums and daughters," said Fiona. "It's got such a vibe. We didn't have to go out and market it. Women understand it."

If men find the preponderance of women too much, they can take themselves off to its spin-off, a restaurant, cafe and shop in Wellington Street, where there is more of a mix of the sexes.

Fiona and Alison are looking for premises in the City of London and in London's West End. Forget tea at the Ritz. Tea at Fifi & Ally's will be on everyone's lips.

The concept has taken the retail world by storm. Among awards it won in 2006 was Most Entrepreneurial Company in the Glasgow Business Awards. In 2007, it was ranked among Retail Week's top 100 stores in the world.

The Cupping Salon won Most Stylish Cafe in the Scottish Style Awards, Wellington Street won the 2007 Food Hero of the Year award and was nominated for Scottish Tastemakers of the year.

Both are experienced business women. Alison is an arts director based in London, while Fiona, who lives in Kilmacolm, is a chartered surveyor specialising in retail development and has run her own firm for 18 years.

Fiona – 43 and mum to 10-year-old Tori – and Alison – 40 and mum to Millie, 7 – have got on well since they played at shops as girls.

"We have spookily similar tastes," laughs Fiona, who is based in Glasgow, while Alison is in London.

The girls dreamed up the concept of Fifi & Ally over a couple of glasses of wine.

Fiona said: "We were getting frustrated at seeing the same old multiples and shopping environments.

"We saw there was a gap in the market for somewhere you could slow down and take the hassle for shopping."

With their background, they found it relatively easy to get funding, but Fiona takes satisfaction in recalling one bank manager who described what they had in mind as sounding like a "mad bazaar".

"Later, he said 'I wish I had backed you'."

Fiona added: "We've had tears, we're challenged all the time to keep things fresh but the day we stop laughing is the day we stop."

The Wellington Street eaterie was 2007's Food Hero of the Year

EveningTimes scotsbusinesswoman07 in association with TSG

DR LESLEY SAWERS
CHAMBER OF COMMERCE

LESLEY SAWERS, the chief executive of Glasgow Chamber of Commerce, is an inspirational role model.

And she has one important message when she goes back to Our Lady's High, her old school in Cumbernauld: "Grasp all the opportunities that come your way."

Dr Sawers adds: "I'm an example of the kid who went to state schools, got to university – and made the most of the opportunities presented to me.

"What I find most frustrating is that people don't make the most of opportunities.

"Unfortunately, with the closely with the city council, has played an integral role in revitalising Glasgow. Membership has risen from 1300 to 2000.

Lesley, 49, has been a superwoman for Glasgow and she expects that to continue when she joins the SCDI.

She says: "It's all about the city, growing the economy, securing jobs, supporting the bid for the Commonwealth Games.

"Cities throughout the UK are looking to Glasgow as a role model, because it's delivering.

"If you look at where Glasgow has come from in the past 10 years, there's no limit to what we can achieve."

Warm, friendly, and looking more than a decade younger than her age, Lesley is the approachable, but highly competent face of Scotswomen in business.

Married to Alan McKechnie, who runs a cleaning firm, she has raised the profile of women in business.

She does a lot of work in supporting women's networking and development and training.

She says: "I think schools, teachers and parents have to start looking at career opportunities in sectors such as retail, leisure, tourism and construction – and encourage girls, in particular, to move into careers they might not have thought of."

Unfortunately the X Factor generation look at the rewards... not the effort they have to put in

Lesley has taken up a voluntary role as chair-woman of NCC Scotland, the national children's charity.

She says: "You think about whether you can make the commitment and give up the time. But if you can change one life by taking that on, then you almost have a duty to do it."

Cousins Fiona and Alison came up with an award-winning idea

I'm passionate about improving care for elderly

ARTI PODDAR
ENTREPRENEUR

PASSION IS a word Arti Poddar uses a lot, and it seems a strange one for a 24-year-old to use about care for the elderly.

Usually, the young are fairly indifferent – old age is a long way off.

But Arti grew up helping out in the three care homes her parents ran in Glasgow's South Side and she absorbed their ethos and sense of compassion for others.

And when the former Hutchesons' Grammar School girl left Strathclyde University with an honours degree in technology and business studies, she decided to join her parents instead of pursuing her original ambition of a career in medicine.

Her India-born father, Sarwan, known as Sam, who trained as a civil engineer at Strathclyde University, and her mother Sunita had founded Lambhill Court care homes.

Within just two years, Arti has taken over the running of the homes as operations director, building the business, opening an additional 60 beds and winning awards.

She admits she was fast-tracked to the top, but she has more than proved herself. The business now has a £7million-a-year turnover.

Last year, Arti was named the Young Achiever of the Year in the Asian Business Awards and the previous year won the same title in the Scottish Asian Business Awards.

"My dad says we must provide care as if we were providing it to our own parents," says Arti.

"We have 250 residents and the same number of staff. Our homes are not institutionalised. You need to be passionate about care and be involved.

"Our residents play bingo, chess, have yoga lessons in the gymnasium, go to the theatre and other outings and we have entertainers in. We encourage relatives to get involved."

> **Dad says we must provide care as if we were providing it to our parents**

Arti works seven days a week overseeing the care homes and helping plan a new retirement village for the over-55s between Maryhill and Bearsden.

She is also on the British board of Asitha Broadcasting, an Indian faith channel and a daily audience of 100million.

And Arti has also launched a new company, Nature and Herbs UK Ltd, importing herbal products and Indian health foods.

SCOTSWOMAN OF THE YEAR IN IN ASSOCIATION WITH

St Enoch THE CENTRE OF GLASGOW TSG

THE Technology Services Group (TSG) in Scotland is sponsor of the Evening Times Scotswoman of the Woman of the Year award.

Tom O'Hara, TSG managing director in Scotland, says: "Women are playing an increasingly important role in Scotland's economy by starting and growing businesses and rising to senior roles in all organisations.

"The three finalists in the Scots Businesswoman of the Year category are all outstanding examples of what can be achieved.

"Lesley is head of the senior team in TSG Scotland – so women, the Businesswoman of the Year category has great resonance for me and we are delighted to be supporting it."