

Finding the Middle East in Minnesota

Hummus? You betcha.

Holy Land owner is expanding his business overseas, spreading the good word about Minnesota

BY KENDALL ANDERSON
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Majdi Wadi knows the secret to business success.

It's all in the hummus.

When his brother, Wajdi, first sold pita bread and hummus from a northeast Minneapolis storefront in 1987, "You said 'hummus' and it was like you were talking Chinese," recalls Wadi, CEO and co-founder of Holy Land and the Holy Land Brand line of products.

But 21 years later, most customers know what the Middle Eastern diet staple is (chickpeas + olive oil + lemon juice + garlic, for those not addicted to the delectable dip).

HUMMUS TO PAGE 2

Majdi Wadi, CEO and co-founder of Holy Land in northeast Minneapolis, is overseeing the 21-year-old company's biggest growth spurt. (Photo by Bill Klotz)



Hummus: Holy Land sales are expected to double this year.

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“Now the questions are a lot better, like ‘What can I use this hummus with?’ instead of just ‘What is hummus?’” Wadi says.

Sales are a lot better as well. The small pita (or pocket bread) bakery that Wadi’s brother bought with \$5,000 he’d saved from three jobs has expanded into two sit-down Lebanese restaurants, delis and bakeries and brought in more than \$1.2 million in sales last year.

Sales are expected to double this year because Holy Land is, literally, taking over the 2500 block of Central Avenue N.E. — in both directions. Plans are under way for a \$10 million, 32-unit mixed-used office/residential building along Lowry Avenue; extending northward on Central, construction of the state’s first hummus factory is under way.

The 2,000 square-foot hummus factory (along with expanded restaurant and office space at the main site) comes at the same time Holy Land’s smaller but bustling Global Midtown Market at East Lake Street and 10th Avenue more than doubled in size.

And the company’s bakery, in a leased location at 2922 Washington Ave. N.E., is moving to a much larger space at 1617 Central Ave. N.E., where production will be on display for passersby (the bakery is not open to the public).

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old-fashioned way our mother taught us,” Wadi says. “We want them to be proud of what we’re doing and proud that we’re here.”

The factory will make in one hour what currently takes one day. The glass walls separating it from the adjacent restaurant seating area will allow people to watch.

“Everyone is interested in seeing how we make it,” says Amanda Morgan, customer service manager. “Having it enclosed in glass is Majdi’s idea — he’s got a brilliant mind.”

The company plans to quadruple its sales in five years.

“Let’s just say we’re not investing \$2 million to keep sales as is,” Wadi says.

The 43-year-old Jerusalem native works the phone in his cramped office on the second floor of the restaurant on Central Avenue. Large close-up shots of his three children line the wall, cans of olive oil and cumin sit on a window ledge and a mountain of papers — topped by an open pack of cigarettes — covers a desk.

Employee offices are neater but equally crammed, with two and three people working in what typically is space for one.

Wadi starts working before sunrise and doesn’t stop until close to midnight, employees say. One project that keeps him on the phone at all hours is the company’s recent international expansion. Holy Land products — complete with the “Made in Minneapolis, Minnesota” label — went on sale in Malaysia and Singapore several months ago, and business trips are planned next month to find partners in Shanghai, Hong Kong and Tokyo.

The company also is wrapping up talks with Byerly’s and Lunds to sell Holy Land Brand products (www.holylandbrand.com), which have been sold for years at the Wedge, Cub Foods and Kowolski’s.

Topping it all is the company’s largest marketing campaign to date, aimed at touting the health benefits of hummus. The plan will be rolled out later this year.

Commitment to community

The 100-employee company will add 30 more workers in the next year — most likely, Wadi says, through AccessAbility, Inc., a northeast Minneapolis-based nonprofit that connects people with disabilities and other disadvantages to employers.

AccessAbility officials acknowledge they are in serious talks with Holy Land to hammer out a partnership.

“Majdi personally has a great interest in bettering his local community as he helps the economy — that’s why we are very interested in working something out with him,” says Lisa Lundmark, manager of sales and marketing at AccessAbility.

The factory will include a dome-style roof line, in keeping with Holy Land’s trademark Middle Eastern-style logo. Wadi sees it as a northeast Minneapolis landmark.

But his vision doesn’t stop there. It extends down Lowry Avenue, where the company owns residential property and plans to partner with a local developer to build a new office-residential building. The area has long been cited by government leaders and residents as an area that needs more of the economic development that’s seized the bustling southern and western parts of northeast Minneapolis.

Hummus: Company enhanced packaging to emphasize Minnesota

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According to one city leader, Wadi has already left his family's signature on the area.

"The expansion of Holy Land is a wonderful success story of an incredibly creative and entrepreneurial immigrant to this country ... who's been a great leader in the northeast community," says Paul Ostrow, Minneapolis City Council member for the First Ward. "He really has hit the big time in terms of his business ... It's great for northeast and for the city."

Holy Land's headquarters, which include the traditional prayer room for men and women — Wadi and many of his employees are Muslim — are chock full of dozens of recognitions for business well done.

From the Northeast Minneapolis Chamber of Commerce's plaque declaring the company "Business of the Year" and the police department's recognition of improving the neighborhood to City Pages' best healthy dining title and Mpls/St. Paul Business Journal's declaration that Holy Land is a top-25 metro-area restaurant, the bragging points are prominently displayed.

Where's Minnesota?

Now that Minnesotans are more familiar with what hummus is, Wadi has a new challenge: introducing Minnesota to the world. While marketing Holy Land products in Malaysia and Singapore several months ago, "Everyone was asking

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'Where's Minnesota?' " Wadi says.

To help change that, the company has enhanced its food packaging to include a small picture of the state and a slogan: "Baked fresh in Minnesota, land of 10,000 lakes, golden fields of grain and home of Holy Land Bakery" is followed by a paragraph promoting the Mall of America, the friendly people of Minnesota, the state's world-class music as well as fishing, boating and exploreminnesota.com.

Mama Fatima's recipe

Packaging also tells customers that it's Mama Fatima's recipes they're enjoying. Fatima Wadi moved to Minneapolis with the rest of the Wadi family in the mid-1990s to join her sons. Both men hold degrees in marketing and business — Majdi Wadi from a university in Jordan and Wajdi Wadi from Minnesota State University in Moorhead.

Wajdi Wadi, who first came to Minnesota in the early 1980s, frequently stays in the Middle East and runs the supply side of the business from

there. Many Holy Land products are imported.

Menu and deli items include gyros, grape leaves, baklava and falafel. The grocery's imported cheese selection is among the widest in the city.

But hummus — sort of like potatoes or bread in American cuisine — is the thread that holds it all together.

So what makes the hummus so good?

"No preservative and all natural ingredients," Morgan says. "Our hummus has a shelf life of maximum two weeks — other brands have one month to 45 days."

Wadi talks about hummus with the enthusiasm and rapid-fire speech many Minnesota natives might only use in an argument.

"Hummus is culture, especially where we come from. It is daily breakfast in our culture," he says, rolling up the blueprint he's shared for the new factory. "We want to share this as much as we can with our customers and with Minnesota because they have been so good to us." ■

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