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MINORITY BUSINESS



[Left to Right]

Farooq Bhatti,
Ben Omorogbe,
Patricia Yager,
Majdi Wadi,
Pauline Lee,
Ken Singh

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MINORITY BUSINESS OWNER

Wadi fulfilling his dreams

BY MICHAEL WERNER | CONTRIBUTING WRITER

On a recent night in March, Majdi Wadi stood in the spare, white-walled interior of the Holy Land Bakery, amid a collection of automated mixers, cutters, dividers and other accoutrements of the baking trade. The smell of dough and freshly baked bread scented the air.

The 41-year-old lifted bags of Lebanese pocket bread from the assembly line and turned them about in his hands, scrupulously inspecting each for quality. For a week, Wadi inspected bag after bag of bread — 21,000 in all, before they were packed away in containers bound for Singapore, Cambodia and Vietnam. The shipment was part of the company's first foray into Far Eastern markets.

Wadi is the owner and CEO of Holy Land Brand, a Middle Eastern restaurant, deli and bakery, and his exacting attention to quality has helped the business flourish beyond all aspirations. But the northeast Minneapolis fixture, which today is an \$8-million-per-year earner that employs nearly 100, began humbly. In 1986, Wadi's brother Wajdi Wadi purchased an existing 700-square-foot deli and grocery store and Holy Land was born.

Majdi, a Palestinian, who was living in Jordan at the time, became acquainted with the deli during a visit to Minnesota in 1992. At the invitation of his brother, Majdi left behind a successful restaurant business in Jordan and in 1995 joined the Holy Land enterprise. The business was small, but growing. A year earlier the restaurant and deli moved to its current location on Central Avenue and nearly quadrupled in size to capitalize on the momentum.

In 1999, Majdi assumed control of the business from his brother and in the ensuing years, Holy Land would assemble a panoply of accolades and awards from local magazines and newspapers. Thanks to Wadi's assiduous nature (he commonly works 18-hour days and hasn't taken a vacation in the past 10 years), the business seemed nosed toward success. Then the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, occurred and its prospects were cast into doubt.

Wadi received threatening calls Sept. 12, and friends and associates begged him to consider his safety and shutter the deli for the immediate future. But Wadi refused, and when he arrived at Holy Land the following day, he found several dozen bouquets of flowers and supportive letters placed by the front door.

"I was shocked to see that," Wadi said. "But it showed what this city is all about. It was an experience I will never forget in all my life."

Under Wadi's guidance the company has continued amassing memorable moments. He counts a new contract to export bread to Asia among the most significant. Wadi recently returned from a trip overseas, during which he visited with some of the store

owners selling his bread.

"When I went to the store and saw it on the shelf, it was a feeling you can't describe. I almost cried," he said. "It was amazing."

Holy Land also is expanding its domestic reach; its bread will soon be sold in Cub Food Stores throughout the Twin Cities and in Whole Foods Markets nationwide.



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To handle the increased volume, the business is planning another expansion that will nearly double the business space from 18,000 to 30,000 square feet.

But Wadi said the company is not focused solely on profits, and makes it a priority to support the local community, donating money and resources to such organizations as the American Red Cross, a local Islamic school, a senior home, local churches and mosques, as well as helping fund and feed a

citizen patrol aimed at reducing crime.

"I felt I shouldn't only invest my vision in making money," Wadi said. "If I can help the city and the community, then I should do it."

"Majdi is a very, very morally responsible individual, who has really given to the community in so many ways," said Dale Boxrud, a Northeast Community Development Corp. board member and self-employed contractor, who works with Holy Land. "His business has been the single most important thing to happen to the Central Avenue corridor in the last 10 years."

Wadi said the company's success has surpassed all expectations. "When I came to this country, I came only to have the right to dream, because where we were in the Middle East you don't even have that right. But then I came to this country and found out that it's not just a dream. Your dreams come true and the sky is your limit. And guess what, beyond the sky is your limit."

Michael Werner is based in Eugene, Ore.

Majdi Wadi

Age: 41

Company: Holy Land Brand

Headquarters: Minneapolis

Founded: 1986

Business: Middle Eastern restaurant, deli and bakery

2006 Revenue: More than \$8 million

Employees: 95

Web site: www.holylandbrand.com

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