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How an Afghan refugee with no grocery store experience opened Columbia's go-to market

Charles Cohen 7/8/24 5:30 a.m. EDT



Mohammad Sultani calls his truck a good friend. He gained the essential capital from driving four years cross country to open Bamyan Halal Meat international grocery market in Columbia. (Mariam Alimi/For the Baltimore Banner)

For four years, Mohammad Sultani drove a semi-truck across America, an Afghan refugee who white-knuckled the steering wheel through deserts, up mountains and on snarled city streets, working 12-hour days and sleeping in the back of his vehicle.

Yes, America's landscapes were majestic, he says, but the most beautiful sight for him awaited at home — his wife and three children in Columbia. All this rough tractor-trailer work fed his goal of opening an Afghan food store in Howard County, and he wanted to do so without taking on a loan. But his dream was to have his family with him in the store, working and growing up as he served his community.

For the 39-year-old, cross-country trucking has paid off.

Tucked in a quiet, leafy enclave of Columbia, Bamyan Halal Meat international grocery store is the area's only Afghanistan-focused food market, Sultani says, specializing in goods from his home country and butchered, Halal-prepared meats. The next closest one is in Manassas, Virginia, more than 60 miles away.

He estimates that his store, which opened in 2021, carries about 3,500 items, from teas to the rolled rugs in the corner to dried fruits and nuts — an Afghan must for the household — in an ambitious effort to serve the community as a Halal butchering hub and food market. Best of all, he can look over to see his wife, Maria, helping a customer, or their now fourth child, and their 3-year-old son running in the candy section. At the butcher's counter stands his 14-year-old son, Mohammad Yusuf.

It was no easy journey. Sultani had no butchering or grocery experience. He relied on the kindness of strangers and his family. When that wasn't enough, he started driving trucks.

Watching a customer pile goods on his counter, he recounts the road to this moment.

"Driving the truck on the mountain, like sometimes it's up to 80,000 pounds loaded, those are big challenges for truck drivers," he said. "I was telling myself like, this is not a permanent life; this is just a life that takes you to where you want to be."

Many immigrants gravitate toward entrepreneurism because of the limitations they find in seeking employment, said Dan Kosten, assistant vice president for policy and advocacy at the National Immigration Forum in Washington.

"As immigrants that come to this country enter the workforce, they realize how little they can make as an actual worker because of their background or their language restrictions," he said.

About 18% of the business owners in the Baltimore, Towson and Columbia area are immigrants, according to an NIF study.

Sultani's journey to opening his business began in Afghanistan, where he said his job fixing Humvees for the U.S. military from Kabul to Helmand made him a target of the Taliban, forcing him and his family to flee to the United States. With the assistance of the International Rescue Committee, they came in 2013 to Baltimore, where he knew a friend would help him settle. Sultani found a job as a mechanic, which he said only allowed him to live paycheck to paycheck.

He also realized he was missing out on being around his family.

"When you work for someone else, you are giving those hours away," he said.

Like many entrepreneurs, Sultani saw an opportunity in addressing a basic unmet need.

After settling in the Baltimore area, Sultani and his wife had difficulty finding Halal meats and other dishes, not to mention Afghan breads and sweets. Their young children asked why they couldn't eat things such as chicken nuggets that were not prepared through the Halal tradition.

Realizing they were not the only Afghan family who found themselves driving great distances to do their shopping, Sultani believed he had a viable business idea.



A customer peruses Bamyan market, which offers hard-to-find Afghan products. The next-closest Afghan market is in Virginia, Mohammed Sultani says. (Mariam Alimi / For The Baltimore Banner)

Only one problem: Sultani had no grocery experience.

Sultani wanted to open a butchery, but he'd never prepared meat. He wanted to offer an Afghan food emporium with everything from popular Halal chicken fingers to lollipops to fresh-baked Afghan flatbreads to an intricate assortment of dried fruits, but he had never ordered stock. He had never drawn up construction plans, installed a walk-in refrigerator and most

definitely never operated a meat-cutting band saw, which could cut off fingers with the ease of trimming a leg of lamb.

Sultani, with a smile, noted that strangers have played a key role in his life. He recalled that, when he attempted to get his standard driver's license, he didn't know he needed to provide his own vehicle to take the test. He walked around the Glen Burnie Motor Vehicle Administration knocking on drivers' windows asking if he could "rent" their car to take the test. He found one person willing, and he passed in a late-model Mercedes-Benz in exchange for filling the tank.

Another time, he drove the hour and a half to the Afghan store in Manassas, Virginia. He walked into the market where he had been a customer and told the owner he planned to open a similar Afghan store, assuring him it should be far enough away that he shouldn't be competition.

"All I knew about food is to eat food," he said. "That's all I know. Can you help with this?"

Sultani is still moved not only by what happened next but what ensued for months until he opened his store.

"He looked at me, [and] he said, 'I don't care about Maryland [or] if you even open across the street, I will still help you,'" Sultani recalled. That help would come in the form of countless phone calls and handwritten lists ranging from purchasing fixtures to how to lay out a butchery. It's a relationship that lasts to this day.

Reached in Virginia, Mirwais Kohistani, who now owns two other businesses besides Prime Halal market, recalls Sultani walking into the front door with his ask. At first, he suggested that Sultani open an automotive repair shop because he was a mechanic. But Sultani said he was tired of that profession and saw this market as a way to work alongside his family.

"I told him, of course, I will teach you from the beginning to how to finish," Kohistani said.

Kohistani said he believes in helping anyone who asks and, in this case, he wanted to help Sultani avoid some of the bumps that he himself had to endure when opening his market.

On a sheet of paper, Kohistani wrote the contacts to food suppliers and steps to take when seeking county approval to open. He allowed him to take photos of his butchery station, including the walk-in refrigerator. Later, Sultani would go to Virginia to learn the craft from Kohistani's butcher. But, after opening in July 2021, there was the not-so-small part of letting

customers, the Afghanistan community in particular, know that such a store existed off Route 100, next to a pizza spot.

Using social media, posting signs in median strips and stopping families in traditional Afghan dress weren't enough to prevent wasting expired meat in the early days. Sultani had invested about $250,000, much of which came from trucking, but while learning to run the business, making mistakes cost him money.

I was disappointed maybe for an hour, but at the end of the day I said I won't give up," he said.

After the market opened, Sultani had to supplement the cash flow by continuing to drive trucks, a perilous job that he never felt comfortable with. When he had the store, he took only night truck-driving jobs so he could get back to run the market. While he was away, his wife learned English at Howard County Community College and worked part time at a day care, and then ran the store.

It wasn't until five months ago that Sultani could give up truck driving. He now has the rig up for sale.

He believes the turnaround came from learning that the store should reflect what the customers want, not what he thinks they should want. If they couldn't find an item, he made sure they had it next time. Despite the power of social media, business still came from the oldest way of promotional campaigns — word of mouth.

A New Jersey woman entered the story with a child in tow. "We heard about you," Nadia Malik said. "We heard there's good meat, there's good people."

Malik and family grabbed a toy for 6-year-old Zia, dried fruits, dates and two models of The Kaaba.

"My cousin raves about this place," she said.

On a Saturday afternoon, the place was continually packed with families buying in bulk. One Pakistani family from Frederick, Maryland, ordered a leg of lamb butchered into choice cuts for a series of curries — a month's worth.



Customers are not shy about buying in bulk, loading up on the essentials from dried apricots to English candies. (Mariam Alimi / For The Baltimore Banner)

During a lull, Mohammad Yusuf said he welcomes the chance to work with his father, especially after the years of him being on the road driving a truck. The teenager said he is going to open his own store, something much bigger.

His father had no problem being one-upped by his son.

For Sultani, the struggle has been about more than supporting the family.

"My goal was always to open a business for my family to work together, to eat together, spend time together, have fun together," he said. "This was always my goal."

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