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Kristin Babbie Kelterborn

A Cheese Producer Pursues a New Market through E-commerce: The Case of Mohamed Bakkar

“Ma’assalama!” said Mohamed Bakkar, bidding farewell after delivering a package of cheese to the owner of a small dairy store in Esenyurt, a district in Istanbul with a large population of Syrian refugees. Under his Besmaⁱ brand, Bakkar used traditional methods to produce cheese commonly consumed in Syria (see **Exhibit 1**). Bakkar had been in business in Turkey for about five years and had a base of ten Syrian-owned stores that carried his products.

Bakkar hopped on his motorcycle to return to the facility where his cheese was made. As he zipped through Esenyurt, he passed many shops selling Syrian-style cheeses made by other producers. Besma was among the first local producers of Syrian-style cheese in Istanbul, but over the years the market had become increasingly crowded. Bakkar decided that to grow Besma he would need to expand his reach and target both Syrian and Turkish customers directly.

Upon arriving at his production facility, Bakkar called a close friend who always provided good business advice. He told his friend about his idea to sell cheese directly to customers, including Turks, and how he was not sure where to begin. “Do you have a website? Are you on Instagram?” asked the friend. When Bakkar replied no to both questions, his friend said, “You can reach customers online. I have been teaching myself how to build e-commerce websites and how to use Instagram, so I can do it for you.”

His friend’s offer sounded like a promising start for expansion. But the conversation sparked additional questions for Bakkar: Is launching Besma online worth the effort? How can I appeal to Syrians *and* Turks? If customers do purchase my cheese online, how can I deliver their orders?

Background

Before Besma, Bakkar’s life had been very different. He had lived near Damascus, the capital of Syria, and had been an electrical engineer. In 2016 he fled Syria due to the country’s civil war. When he arrived

ⁱ Besma translates to “joy” in Arabic.

in Istanbul, he was unable to find a job in his field because he could not speak Turkish. So, Bakkar reached out to some Syrian contacts in Istanbul for advice. They encouraged him to start a food business and target Istanbul's large population of Syrian refugees.ⁱⁱ

Bakkar decided to pursue a cheese business and make the cheese the same way his mother did when he was a child. He rented a small facility in Esenyurt where he could produce the cheese in bulk and prepare it for distribution to local Syrian-owned dairy stores. As his business grew, he hired three employees. Through an entrepreneur incubation program, Bakkar expanded his business knowledge and contacts, enabling him to increase production and secure more retailers as customers.

Cheese Products

Besma specialized in three types of cheese (see **Exhibit 2**):

- Syrian-style string cheese (jibneh mshallaleh in Arabic) is made of thin, braided strands that are untangled before eaten. With a taste similar to mozzarella but lighter, it can be eaten alone or melted onto bread or pastries. It is often mixed with spices such as black cumin or sesame seeds.¹
- A household staple in Syria often served for breakfast, cubic cheese (see **Exhibit 3**) is also known as "native cheese." Syrians usually make it in large amounts during the summer and store it for consumption in the winter. It is known for its high quality and has a medium level of richness.
- Halloumi originates from Cyprus and is very common in Syria. Due to its high melting point, the cheese is often grilled or fried. It is known for its squeaky texture and is often eaten for breakfast along with bread and olives.

It took about 24 hours for Bakkar to produce a batch of 500 kilograms of cheese. The cheeses were made in small batches using fresh, whole milk from nearby farmers.

Target Market

Bakkar had built a customer base of ten Syrian-owned dairy stores, which all served the local Syrian community. His cheese appealed to Syrians because, according to Bakkar, it had a "village taste and smelled like home." He sold the cheese in bulk, in 20- and 10-kilogram packages labeled with Besma's name and logo (see **Exhibit 4**). Until now, Bakkar preferred selling to stores rather than to individual customers because distribution was more efficient.

Syrian-style cheese was not widely available in Istanbul when Bakkar started his business. But, now that many Syrian-style cheese producers had entered the market, Bakkar needed to be more strategic about marketing and business growth. Bakkar saw the Turkish market as his next frontier. It would be a big change to start selling directly to consumers and attract Turks as well as Syrians.

ⁱⁱ By 2021, Turkey hosted approximately 60% of all registered Syrian refugees, for a total of 3.6 million (<http://www.3rpsyriacrisis.org/>). In Istanbul itself there were approximately 548,000 registered Syrian refugees (<https://www.brookings.edu/blog/future-development/2019/11/25/turkeys-syrian-refugees-the-welcome-fades/>).

Cheese was an essential part of the Turkish diet, which was made evident by the abundant array of Turkish-style cheese in Istanbul. Bakkar's cheese had a rich, full-fat taste, distinguishing it from typical Turkish-style cheeses which tended to contain less fat. So far, he had struggled to get Turks to try his cheese. He lacked Turkish connections and could not speak Turkish. But Bakkar believed that if he could overcome these obstacles and get Turks to taste his cheese, they would enjoy it.

Launching Besma Online

Bakkar thought he could make Besma cheese available to Syrian and Turkish customers via an e-commerce website, offered in both Turkish and Arabic. With a bilingual website and digital marketing strategies, he could address the challenge of not speaking Turkish himself.

However, Bakkar saw distribution as one of his greatest challenges to successful e-commerce. Istanbul traffic was grueling and it could sometimes take hours to move across the city. Currently, Bakkar's store customers either picked up their orders from Besma's facility or Bakkar would personally deliver orders on his motorcycle. With just ten retail store customers, delivery was manageable. But Bakkar knew selling directly to individual customers online would require a better distribution solution.

Bakkar was also concerned about not being able to produce enough cheese to meet demand. Even now he sometimes needed to purchase from other cheese producers. His facility was small and his three employees were already very busy. To scale up, Bakkar would need a larger production space and additional employees.

To generate awareness and drive customers to an e-commerce website, Bakkar considered creating an Instagram account but he had limited experience with social media. Even with his friend's help, he was already working 60 hours a week and would not have time to regularly post content and attract followers.

After talking with his friend, Bakkar assessed the pros and cons of launching Besma online. How would he attract and satisfy visitors to his website? And, if the website was successful, how would he produce and distribute the increased number of orders he anticipated?

Exhibits

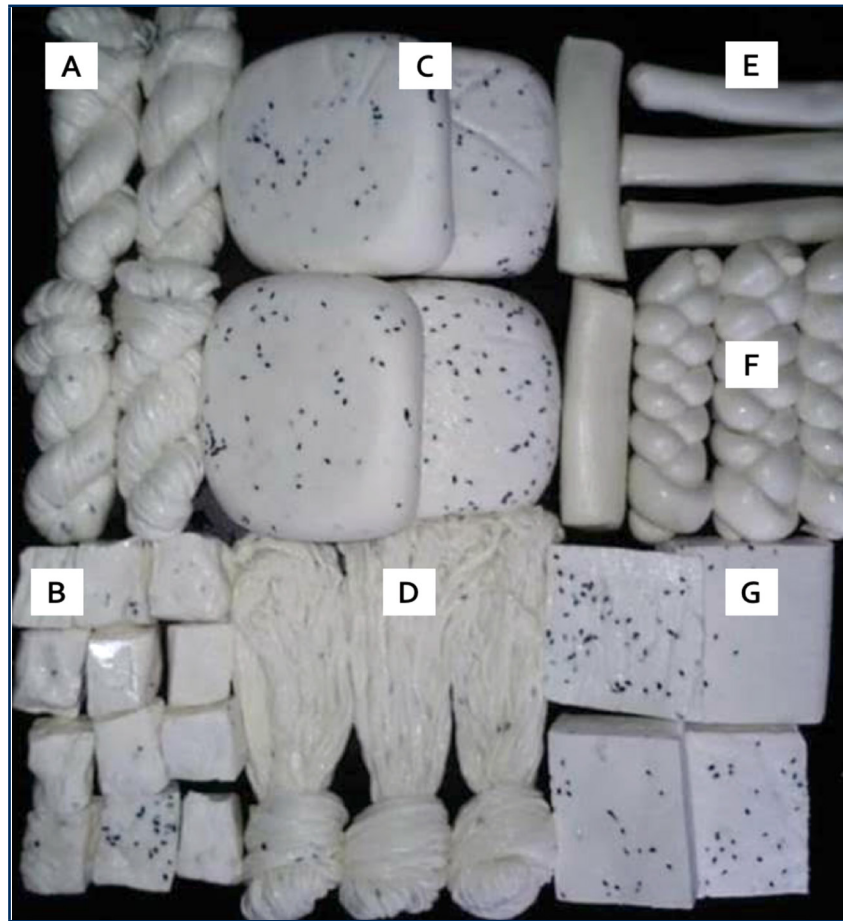
Exhibit 1

Mohamed Bakkar Prepares a Dish with Besma Cheese



Source: Case author.

Exhibits (cont.)

**Exhibit 2
Besma Cheese Products**

Source: Mohamed Bakker.

Besma produced three types of Syrian-style cheese, pictured above. A and D are string cheeses. A is called Shamiye; the style is attributed to the Sham region of Damascus. D is called Hamwiye; the style is attributed to Hama, a city in central Syria. B, C, and G are cubic cheeses. E and F are Halloumi cheese in different shapes.

Exhibits (cont.)

**Exhibit 3
Cubic Cheese**



Source: Mohamed Bakkar.

A serving suggestion for Besma's cubic cheese. In Syria, cubic cheese is commonly eaten at breakfast.

Exhibits (cont.)

**Exhibit 4
Besma Packaging**



Source: Mohamed Bakkar.

Endnotes

- ¹ Roufs, Timothy G., and Kathleen Smyth Roufs. *Sweet Treats Around the World: An Encyclopedia of Food and Culture*. ABC-CLIO LLS, 2014.

Notes



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