

mini-case 3-275-023

June 20, 2023

Amy Gillett
Kristin Babbie Kelterborn

Strategizing a Recipe for Success: Chef Fajer Al Mansoori Looks to Grow

Fajer Al Mansoori arranged the salmon, tandoori spice mix, and basmati rice on her countertop. It was July 2022, and she would be showing her 40,000 Instagram followers how to make tandoori grilled salmon. She would also upload the video to her increasingly popular YouTube channel that currently had about 400 subscribers. For the past six months, Chef Fajer had been spending less time on her food product business and dedicating more time to making cooking tutorials and posting them to her social media channels. She was pleased with the following she had gained in her native Bahrain and was excited to see a growing number of followers from neighboring Saudi Arabia. Through social media, she generated new leads for her consulting business, promoted her own cooking classes and had started generating revenue through sponsored posts.

However, she was still just one person, who felt pulled in different directions. Should she concentrate on developing content on social media and growing her following? Should she expand her food consulting business or hold more cooking classes? Or, should she return to focusing only on her food product business? She knew she should narrow her focus to gain more traction, but what was the best direction? She really wanted to have a plan in place by early September.

Background

At 38 years old, Al Mansoori had an extensive background in food and hospitality. She had studied hotel management in Switzerland and held a food science degree from Harvard University. From 2015-2017, she had worked as a chef at Le Meridien Hotel in the center of Manama, Bahrain's capital. From 2018-2022, she performed weekly cooking demonstrations on Bahraini national television. While not paid for her appearances, she gained national recognition and became a celebrity chef. In 2018, she opened her first fine dining restaurant (Russo's by Fajer) in a prime area of Adliya, a tourist destination with the finest restaurants in Bahrain. In 2019, she opened a second restaurant, a sandwich bar (Marvelous, decorated with and inspired by her love of Marvel characters and DC Comics) in Hamad Town, her hometown.

Published by WDI Publishing, a division of the William Davidson Institute (WDI) at the University of Michigan.

©2023 Amy Gillett and Kristin Babbie Kelterborn. This case was written by Amy Gillett and Kristin Babbie Kelterborn, both of the Entrepreneurship Development Center at the William Davidson Institute at the University of Michigan. The case was prepared as the basis for class discussion rather than to illustrate either effective or ineffective handling of a situation. The case should not be considered criticism or endorsement and should not be used as a source of primary data. This case was completed as part of the Center for International Private Enterprise (CIPE) Project "Economic Diversification and Access to Finance" designed to support inclusive and sustainable development by expanding opportunities for Bahraini SMEs. The project was supported by the U.S. Department of State.

After a diagnosis of breast cancer in May 2020, Al Mansoori decided to close both of her restaurants and dedicate herself to her cancer treatment and four young children. It was difficult to cook fresh meals on a daily basis during this time, so to supplement her own cooking she started consuming convenient frozen food items. However, she found frozen foods to be expensive, bland, and lacking in variety.

This realization inspired her to launch her own prepared frozen food line in Bahrain in March 2021. Her product line included seven products, which she sold to consumers through her website. Her line included international offerings such as croissants and pasta dishes and regional favorites such as shish tawook. Scaling her business proved to be difficult, as she found that the Bahraini public did not buy ready-made meals, despite the popularity of them in countries such as the United States. Al Mansoori concluded that changing the behavior of the Bahraini consumer would take too much time and money.

In parallel with her direct-to-consumer business, Al Mansoori hoped she could expand her sales through third-party distribution. She negotiated a contract with a supermarket chain in April 2021 to supply frozen foods. However, the deal never materialized because Al Mansoori became frustrated with the never-ending paperwork required to get her products into stores.

In March 2022, she enrolled in a four-month program in Bahrain that matched her with a seasoned entrepreneur to be her mentor and help her navigate business growth.¹ The mentor, after learning more about her business and the challenges she faced, advised her to abandon the food product business and instead focus on monetizing her growing social media presence. Her social media focused on Instagram, where she had 62,000 followers, and YouTube, which she had joined recently and had about 1,000 followers. As a “solopreneur”—running the business on her own with no employees or business partners—it would be too time-consuming to continue her existing businesses while pursuing new opportunities. She decided to follow her mentor’s advice and stepped away from the food product business.

Social Media

Al Mansoori focused on two social media channels: Instagram and YouTube. She shot and produced all of the video content on her own. Since featuring cooking demonstrations on Bahraini national television, she had gained fame and credibility among the Bahraini public, enabling her to quickly become a social media influencer.

Al Mansoori’s social media channels offered cooking tutorials, which were different from the content featured on existing, food-related Bahraini social media accounts. For example, while many Bahrainis offered cooking tips and short videos on social media, most did not show the chef’s face. Instead, they showed “hands cooking” to appeal to an audience that enjoyed watching food being cooked as a form of entertainment, rather than to learn new cooking techniques. In contrast, Al Mansoori’s videos always showed her preparing the dishes step by step and she would often look straight into the camera while offering tips. In this way, she had developed an excellent rapport with her followers and cultivated a personal brand combining friendliness and competence. Al Mansoori further differentiated herself by featuring both local and international recipes and cooking techniques that she had picked up throughout her global career. She also offered live streams featuring how to prepare a whole dish from scratch within 20 minutes.

Al Mansoori delivered tutorials that covered both main courses and desserts. Among her most popular was a video on how to make gummy bears.

While most of her followers were from Bahrain, she also had a growing audience from Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. Since the videos were in Arabic, she dreamed of expanding her audience into other large Arab-speaking countries, such as the United Arab Emirates and Egypt. While Egypt was far away and she didn't have any followers there yet, it would represent a major opportunity for her. "If you go to Egypt it means you are everywhere in the Arab world," said Al Mansoori.

Revenue Streams

After participating in the mentorship program, Al Mansoori had five revenue streams, which together earned her about 10,000 USD profits per month. She had no overhead expenses and her only sizeable business expense—and the only one she was tracking—was the small monthly rent she paid for the kitchen.

- **Social Media Sponsored Posts:** Companies in Bahrain had taken note of Al Mansoori's growing social media presence and the fact that her followers included high-level government ministers and other "movers and shakers" of Bahrain. For example, the National Bank of Bahrain paid her to post a photo promoting the bank with the hashtag "National Day" on her Instagram account.
- **Food Sector Consulting:** Companies in the food sector paid her to serve as a consultant. For packaged food companies, she had written cookbooks featuring their products. For restaurants, she had developed new menu items (though the restaurants did not advertise that they were developed by Al Mansoori).
- **Restaurant Collaborations:** Restaurants invited Al Mansoori to be a visiting chef for a period of time, typically ranging from a week to a month. She would create a menu branded with her name, and then received a percentage of the sales.
- **Cooking Classes:** Al Mansoori rented an inexpensive, well-equipped kitchen with training space. There, she offered cooking classes to small groups four times a month. She advertised the classes through her social media accounts and was able to fill them with four to six students, who each paid 100-150 USD per two-hour session.
- **Kitchen Rental:** When she was not using the space for training classes, she rented it out to others. Kitchen rental was profitable.

Where to Take the Business?

"If I were happy with that, I wouldn't be an entrepreneur," said Al Mansoori of the current revenues. She hoped to double her revenues within the next two years and quadruple them within five years. And, her aspirations did not stop there: She dreamed of becoming the "Martha Stewart of the Middle East." She admired how Martha Stewart never stopped, continuously evolving and working hard, even past the age of 80 (see **Appendix A**).²

Al Mansoori envisioned her Instagram presence growing to 100,000 followers from her current 62,000. When this happened, she figured she would return to the food product business. This time, instead of creating complex entrees, she would launch a business making desserts. A couple of products came to mind. Her popular video on how to make gummy bears suggested she might find a good market for this easy-to-make sweet treat. She figured her four housekeepers could pitch in to help with production.

Additionally, she could offer packaged desserts, as Bahrain had a culture that "lives on dessert," as she noted. She could start with a fresh packaged dessert like halwa—a relatively easy dish to make and

very popular in Bahrain—and sell it through supermarkets. She already had relationships with the major supermarkets through her previous foray into selling frozen packaged foods.

Al Mansoori felt fortunate to have so many opportunities to consider. But she was a one-woman show with only so many hours in the day. She wondered where to take her business next. She felt it would be an opportune time to check back in with her mentor for more advice.

Appendix

Appendix A Background on Martha Stewart and her Business

Martha Stewart is an American businesswoman, television personality, author, and lifestyle guru. She is well known for her work in home decoration, cooking, and entertaining. Stewart began her career as a stockbroker before starting her own catering business in the 1970s. She later expanded her brand to include magazines, television shows, books (she has published 99 lifestyle books), and a line of home products, branded under her name, sold at major retailers.

Stewart started Martha Stewart Living Omnimedia (MSLO) in 1997. The company is involved in four business segments: publishing, internet, broadcasting media platforms, and merchandising product lines. MSLO's diverse range of business ventures includes print publications, television and radio shows, and e-commerce websites. In 1999, the company went public, listing its shares on the New York Stock Exchange. In 2015, MSLO was acquired by Sequential Brands Group which in 2019 sold it to Marquee Brands. As of 2022, MSLO had 406 employees and annual revenues of \$141.9M.

In the publishing segment, *Martha Stewart Living* was a very popular monthly magazine from the late 1990s to May 2022, when it ceased publication. At that time, Stewart and her company made a strategic shift to focus on her Martha.com website which combines e-commerce and content curated by Stewart. Products for sale on her site include cookware, gourmet food, bedding, and clothing – all branded under the “MARTHA by Martha Stewart” brand name. She has a large following on TikTok and Instagram and started a podcast series in 2022. Also in 2022, she debuted two new TV shows: *Martha Cooks* and *Martha Gardens*.

Sources: “Martha Stewart.” *Biography*, Updated 28 Oct. 2021. <https://www.biography.com/business-leaders/martha-stewart>. Accessed 1 June 2023; “Martha Stewart.” *Britannica*, 15 May 2023. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Martha-Stewart>. Accessed 1 June 2023; “Martha Stewart Living Omnimedia Revenue.” *Zippia*. <https://www.zippia.com/martha-stewart-living-omnimedia-careers-45560/revenue/>. Accessed 1 June 2023.

Endnotes

- ¹ "CIPE Launches a Program to Drive Sustainable SME Growth in Bahrain." *Center for International Private Enterprise*, 10 Dec. 2021. <https://www.cipe.org/newsroom/cipe-launches-a-program-to-drive-sustainable-sme-growth-in-bahrain/>. Accessed 14 Mar. 2023.
- ² "Martha Stewart's Net Worth Is Nothing But Very Good Things! How the Domestic Diva Made Her Fortune." *Parade Magazine*, 10 Feb. 2022. <https://parade.com/1199876/jessicasager/martha-stewart-net-worth/>. Accessed 9 Mar. 2023.

Notes



Established at the University of Michigan in 1992, the **William Davidson Institute** (WDI) is an independent, non-profit research and educational organization focused on providing private-sector solutions in emerging markets. Through a unique structure that integrates research, field-based collaborations, education/training, publishing, and University of Michigan student opportunities, WDI creates long-term value for academic institutions, partner organizations, and donor agencies active in emerging markets. WDI also provides a forum for academics, policy makers, business leaders, and development experts to enhance their understanding of these economies. WDI is one of the few institutions of higher learning in the United States that is fully dedicated to understanding, testing, and implementing actionable, private-sector business models addressing the challenges and opportunities in emerging markets.