



King of the Square

ABDUL-WAHEED WAHED
SERVES A PLATE OF
AFGHANI-GERMAN
CUISINE

PHOTOS BY TRASK BEDORTHA

THE STORY OF ABDUL-WAHEED WAHED AND HIS KESEY SQUARE CART BY RICK LEVIN

Thirty years ago, Abdul-Waheed Wahed was sitting in the Frankfurt airport, waiting for his flight from Germany to Eugene. Wahed, a Kabul native who'd earlier fled the Soviet conflict in Afghanistan, had some time to kill. So, perched at the airport bar in 1986, he had a few drinks. A woman he knew sat down beside him. They shared a whiskey, then a few more. Wahed missed his flight.

Wahed, 61, is the chef and proprietor of the Afghani-German Cuisine cart that sits weekdays in Kesey Square, and his life story is as fascinating as his food is delicious. As a member of the Afghanistan national soccer team, he left Kabul in 1979, relocating to Bombay (now Mumbai), India, for nine months before rejoining the team in Frankfurt.

In Germany he was courted by a handful of pro soccer clubs, including the New York Cosmos. But three days before signing as a forward with the Eintracht Frankfurt team, Wahed broke both his legs in a serious car accident. It took a couple years of rehab to recover, after which Wahed played a bit of second-tier ball. But things had changed.

He kicked around a few years in Frankfurt, carousing and enjoying the nightlife. He worked construction during the day and pulled hours at night as a barkeep. Eventually Wahed opened his own restaurant, where he learned to prepare the cuisine he's been dishing out in Eugene for the past three decades. "As a boss, I'd like to know everything," Wahed says of becoming a chef in Frankfurt. "I should know how to cook."

Which brings us back to that night in the Frankfurt airport. "I sold all my stuff," he recalls. "I had just my handbag and my boarding pass." But, as Wahed says, things happen, and the female friend who joined him in the terminal lounge invited him back to her brother's apartment, where they had a glass of wine. Wahed says that, next thing he knew, he woke up and it was morning.

Two years later, they were married, and in 1989 Wahed and his wife finally caught that fated flight to Eugene, where for nearly three decades he's been serving up his distinctly multicultural cuisine as a fixture in Kesey Square as well as Saturday Market and the Oregon Country Fair.

Wahed says the pairing of his native Afghani cuisine with standard German street food like sausages was a no-

brainer. "When I came here, I saw nothing German," he says of arriving in town, where family members already had an Afghani food stand going at Saturday Market. "If you go back into history, Germany and Afghanistan were always best friends."

In culinary terms, the friendship is a match made in heaven. On the European side, Wahed offers a scrumptious selection of bun-meats including *rindswurst* (the classic Frankfurter beef sausage), bratwurst, currywurst, Thuringer and a chicken sausage filled with feta and spinach, all served on fresh rolls he gets from a German baker in Lebanon (Oregon, that is). "I like everything fresh and original," he says.

Wahed explains that the staple of Afghani cuisine is rice, after which your standard dish includes a lot of spiced vegetables heavy in vinegar, cilantro, garlic and jalapenos. His spinach side is particularly tasty. The simple menu includes either chicken or a vegetarian option, and a side of *bolanis* is highly recommended — folded tortilla filled with seasoned potatoes and green onions.

An affable guy with an easy manner, Wahed enjoys shooting the breeze with the folks who saunter up to his cart in Kesey. "I enjoy life," he says, and he particularly seems to enjoy feeding people. Wahed points out that, every year for the past 20 years, a group of Australians attending Oregon Country Fair has eaten breakfast, lunch and dinner at his cart. The story tickles him.

Of course, Kesey Square has been in the spotlight lately, and Wahed — often the sole food cart standing in the square — is at ground-zero in the debate of whether to leave the southwest corner of Willamette and Broadway as an open public space or, rather, fill it in with more apartments and retail.

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BOLANIS

"For the people, for downtown, it's the most fun place," Wahed says of Kesey Square, adding that, instead of building more residential structures on the property, more should be done to draw people into the revitalized downtown core. "The people should be here," Wahed says.

The Afghani-German Cuisine cart in Kesey Square is open 10:30 am to 7 pm Monday through Thursday, and 10:30 am to 3 pm and 6:30 pm to 2 am Friday. Catering available. For further information, call 554-5581 or email a.waheedwahed@yahoo.com.