

Ethiopian Markets Flourishing in Portland

Walk into Million Fikru's food store, and you're immersed in a tempting aroma of spices. Ethiopian food uses a lot of different spices, Fikru says, many of them blends, such as Berbere, a hot chile mixture. Fikru opened the store in 2004, but he has been in business since his late teens. That's when he fled Ethiopia for Sudan, "during the communist time," and had to find a way support himself.

Fikru's family were farmers, although his father worked for the government. He is the first entrepreneur, he says.

"I have this business thing in me," he says. "The first time I started a business was in Sudan. That's when I discovered I could

AWASH MARKET

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ner became exporters.

But after the United States gave him political asylum, Fikru left that business behind to come to Portland. He was just 23 years old. "I love Portland", he says. "It's my home."

In Oregon, Fikru took any jobs he could find, before studying engineering at Oregon State University. He thought he'd left business behind, but found he couldn't get a job. After numerous interviews, where he was passed over for more experienced candidates, Million was frustrated.

How was he going to get experience?

Then, a friend told him that TriMet was looking for medical transportation contractors. Fikru had a car, admittedly an inexpensive car, but it would do the job. So, in 1999, he started Milli's Transit, which con-

tracts with Trimet to take disabled, elderly and sick people to medical appointments. Now there is a lot of competition for that work, he says.

"Now I have 10 cars," he says. "Whatever I make, I put back into the business."

By 2004, Fikru had seen Portland's Ethiopian community swell. He believes at least 7,000 to 8,000 Portlanders share his cultural roots. So with his sister's boyfriend, he opened the store, naming it Awash after a river in his former homeland. They used their savings as start-up money.

"I had maybe two coolers with soda," he says. "My friend gave me some shelves and we had a little money for stock, but it was very limited. Mostly we started with spices and basic foods."

Today he still sells spices, pulses and traditional foods, alongside an expanded range of convenience store items. His store is part of the county's healthy food initiative, because those traditional foods also are good for you. Try snacking on roasted barley kernels instead of commercial chips, he says.

Fukru believes it's an advantage to have another Ethiopian store and a restaurant nearby, because people who go to one of the



Million Fukru is proud of the apple sticker that certifies his store as part of Multnomah County's Healthy Eating Initiative.

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learn and do things on my own. We made shoes, handmade shoes, crosses and bags. Everything was done by hand."

Importers from Canada, Italy and the United Kingdom saw the products and placed orders. Fikru and his business part-

businesses are likely to check out the others too.

"A lot of Americans have adopted kids from Ethiopia and these people have become my good clients," he says. "They buy the bread and the spices so their kids can eat traditional foods."

What advice does Fikru have for young people interested in going into business?

First get an education, he says. "My background and my education help me out. I use my education to live."

Next, he says, it's important to research your business and know yourself.

See AWASH on page 7

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