

Woman-Owned Grocery Expands Offerings

Yadi Benti took over Merkato four years ago. Her husband had opened the Ethiopian

ried and came to Portland from Addis Ababa in Ethiopia 11 years ago. She had just finished school.

Merkato needed a fresh look, so she borrowed money to remodel, add shelves and coolers

Outside the city, she said, it's still common for girls in her home country to marry at 14, 15, and 16, although

food store 11 years previously, and when they separated Benti took over the business. Merkato needed a fresh look, so she borrowed money to remodel, add shelves and coolers and expand her inventory.

"I borrowed from my family and friends," she said. "It took \$30,000 for the remodel and to stock the shelves."

Tears flood into Benti's eyes as she remembers the anxiety she felt after sinking everything she had into the business.

"I really struggled for three years to pay back the money," she says. "I woke up at night thinking about it."

Now, she says, she's on a more solid footing and even feels ready to expand. She's excited that Multnomah County's healthy food initiative recognized her store as a source of healthy food, such as grains, lentils and fruit. And she'd like to have more healthy options by buying another cooler and filling it with fruit and vegetables.

"Who knows, maybe one day I'll buy my building," she says.

Still in her 20s, Benti mar-

MERKATO

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elementary, she hopes life will bring more options.

"My hope for her is that she continues school," she said. "I tell her 'Learn

more.' She is like me and my nature is to help others. She wants to be a doctor so she can help poor families."

Although she finds Portland quiet and rainy she likes it here and isn't going anywhere. Benti's family own a coffee and pastry shop in Ethiopia's bustling capital city and she worked in the café after school, so running a business comes naturally to her, she says.

"The business, for me, is like school. It's taught me everything I know."



Yadi Benti hopes to expand Merkato's produce section.

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Running a business takes a lot of time and dedication, he says. "Are you willing to do that? You have to love what you're doing because if you're not into it, you won't be successful."

"When you open a store, you don't realize you're going to be there 12 hours or more, every day. When you start out you can't hire people. I've seen people start a business and close it within 6 months."

Fukru said he hopes to expand the store as he goes along.

"My ambition is to be strong and successful and to carry more products and persuade more people to try them."