

## An oasis of business

### Calgary entrepreneur builds bridges to the U.A.E.

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Well-known Calgary restaurateur Marco Abdi first met His Royal Highness Sheikh Al Hassan Bin Ali Al Nuaimi about 14 years ago.

The connection came about because the Sheikh's brother went to school with a friend of Abdi's.

That initial introduction has developed into a unique business relationship between Abdi, owner of La Brezza Ristorante in the northeast neighbourhood of Bridgeland, and the Sheikh, a member of the Royal Family that rules the oil-rich United Arab Emirates in the Middle East.

In fact, Abdi has become Sheikh Al Hassan's representative here -- facilitating business meetings between Calgary and Alberta companies that are interested in tapping into the vast opportunities presented in the wealthy U.A.E., particularly the booming economy in its city of Dubai.

"The key is the friendship," says Abdi, sitting at a table in his restaurant this past week. "You can't buy it. The relationship and the friendship it went so long that we've become like family."

According to the U.S. Department of State website, the estimated GDP in 2006 for the U.A.E. was \$163 billion with growth at 9.7 per cent. The website says that in 2006 the U.A.E. produced about 2.8 million barrels of oil per day.

"There's so much business there. It's amazing," says Abdi. "So much opportunity. Anything you can think, they are looking for . . . But first you have to know the country. You have to know the people. You have to know the culture."

It takes some time to build a relationship and time to understand the intricacies of the business culture and laws in the Middle Eastern country. It's not something

Local businessman Jim Sutton, who runs several companies here, has benefited from an introduction to Sheikh Al Hassan facilitated by Abdi.



CREDIT: Herald Arch, Calgary Herald Images  
Marco Abdi, owner of La Brezza Ristorante is the representative to Calgary for Sheikh Al Hassan, a member of the Royal Family that rules the oil-rich United Arab Emirates.



CREDIT: Herald Archive, AFP-Getty Images  
Dubai's skyline is filled with buildings under construction, like the Burj Dubai skyscraper.

that happens overnight.

Sutton, along with partner Chuck Thomas, operates Sutton Thomas Engineering. He also owns a company called AJ Manufacturing, which manufactures agricultural products. And most recently, Canada Agra Trading Ltd. opened an office in the U.A.E. on June 1.

"We're marketing agricultural products into the United Arab Emirates. Beef. Beef products. Poultry. And miscellaneous agricultural products," says Sutton.

He says he has been friends with Abdi for 20 years.

"He's been after me for about three or four years to look at business opportunities over there. About a year and a half ago we did some background research on it. And about a year ago I met Sheikh Hassan, who is Marco's contact in the U.A.E. and really our business mentor over there.

"I travelled to the U.A.E. in January. Did market research, market development. Just took a good look at everything. I met a lot of people. Talked to distributors."

"Went into the supermarkets, saw what kind of product they were getting. Did an overall market study. Made the decision late January that we would focus on that U.A.E. market. Primarily, we market quality product out of Canada and people don't understand that on the international market. Everybody tends to lean towards being price competitive but you have to go sell your product on the basis of its quality."

From a business standpoint, Sutton says, the research indicated they had a product that was superior to what existed there.

"There's a tremendous amount of money in the U.A.E. for upper-end product," says Sutton. "The businessmen that I met there are all experiencing fairly successful businesses. And looking at our product, the sales team and the opportunity to go in there and develop a business . . . well the time was right.

"You have to go in there understanding the business culture and the culture of the country or you'll get a rude awakening and very fast."

That's where Abdi came in.

Sutton says Abdi used to live in the U.A.E. for a few years, met Sheikh Hassan and stayed in touch with him.

"Marco is very connected in all of the community of Calgary and Canada. He introduced me to Sheikh Hassan and we invited Sheikh Hassan to Canada last summer and we put on a big barbecue out at the ranch (Sutton's ranch near Calgary) for him. Kind of made it his day . . . Him and I kind of hit it off. I've got a bit of a sense of humour and so does he. So we really kind of connected as two people.

"Without Marco's involvement and Sheikh Hassan's involvement (this business opportunity in the U.A.E.) wouldn't have taken place. Marco is part of our company in the U.A.E. as is Sheikh Hassan. Sheikh Hassan is chairman of our board and Marco is a partner in the business over there . . . We incorporated in February. Basically got up and running April. Started doing business by May. And right now it's nuts."

Abdi lived in the U.A.E. from 1977 to 1979 before coming to Calgary. He was in charge at the time of setting up menus for employees working for a housing developer. The native of Somalia came to Calgary in 1980 and worked as a janitor in a professional medical building

across the street from where his Italian restaurant now resides. At that time, he was making \$800 a month and thought "it was a big deal."

He later opened his restaurant, which has now been in business for 20 years.

Today, he goes to Dubai three to four times a year. Over the years, he has taken representatives from oil and gas companies, real-estate developers and other firms to meet with officials in the Middle Eastern country. His next trip is in October.

"My job is to take Canadian companies from Calgary, Alberta or the U.S., see their profile and everything, and bring them from here to there. His Highness Sheikh Al Hassan is my partner," says Abdi, adding the Sheikh is a nephew of a ruler of one of the emirates. "But it's so challenging because the culture here is like 'when are we going to sign a contract?'

"The culture down there is like 'I want to know who you are'. They want a relationship . . . It's so difficult because people here they all want to start from the top but they have to start from the beginning. It has been a challenge."

Abdi says Canada has a great reputation in the U.A.E. and officials there want to deal with Canadian companies based there.

"One thing is very important. You have to have a face there," says Abdi. "People they want to see you face to face . . . You have to have a relationship. Without that, you have nothing. There are companies coming from all over the world with so much money and nobody wants to deal with them. Why? Because they have no relationship and this is something I've been trying to tell the companies in Calgary."

Richard Pootmans, business development manager of real estate for Calgary Economic Development, says Dubai is a city that can inspire us and "also give us some new levels of excellence that we can aspire to."

A Calgary business delegation in February visited Dubai along with representatives of Calgary Economic Development and Mayor Dave Bronconnier.

"I've had a good number of phone calls back saying 'darn, we wish we could have gone with the mayor earlier this year, put us down please if you're considering another trip because it is a destination we need to be aware of and learn from'," says Pootmans.

Dan Van Leeuwen, president of Torode Commercial Ltd., who made the journey to Dubai earlier this year with the CED delegation, says developers should be attracted to Dubai for several reasons "but one key is the ability to learn from what is being done there and expand our knowledge base."

"Other business that provide expertise or services should be attracted because of the need from Dubai to attract the best in the class. Our skill and knowledge has tremendous value to their growing economy," says Van Leeuwen.

"Calgary is fast becoming a major player in global business as is Canada."

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