

Sahadi's Specialty & Fine Foods

By Marc Cadiente

Photos by JJ Sulin

Do you want a history lesson along with a handful of almonds and dried fruits, an ounce of cumin, and a quart of Naflion olives? Then head over to Sahadi's on Atlantic Avenue in Brooklyn where the Sahadi family has been offering Middle Eastern and hard-to-find specialty foods to New Yorkers for over fifty years.

The store looks and feels like New York. The lofty space made of bricks and mortar serves as a canvas for the vast array of products that make the store so unique. Jars, bottles, boxes, and cans with seemingly indecipherable labels read like graffiti across long lines of stainless steel shelves, inviting curious shoppers to pause and ogle products of foreign lands. Jugs, bins, and barrels filled with every bean and grain imaginable are grouped together like an epicurean cityscape, while the aroma of prepared food and spices is like a symphony for the olfactory. And the history of Sahadi's is not just about the business—it reads like a true New York tale and a piece of the American dream.

Though the Brooklyn store, as you know it, has been around for over fifty-five years, Sahadi stems back to 1895 when Abraham Sahadi opened A. Sahadi & Co. in New York. In 1919, Wade Sahadi migrated to America [FROM WHERE?] and worked for his Uncle Abraham. By 1941, because of generational differences, the more ambitious Wade and his staid uncle parted ways. Wade was bought out with lentils, chickpeas, and olives, among other products, and with this, he opened up his own business.

During the mid-1940s, the Brooklyn Battery Tunnel was being constructed and with the excavation being done on both the Brooklyn and Manhattan sides, many homes and businesses were displaced. Wade and his business partner moved to Atlantic Avenue in a Middle Eastern neighborhood full of businesses with similar cultural backgrounds. Since then, the store has been growing stronger with the late founder's sons Charlie and Richard at the helm of the business. Charlie's two children have also decided to work with their father, making Sahadi's a third generation enterprise (which also includes Sahadi Fine Foods, a manufacturer, distributor, and importer of specialty foods).

Step into the door at Sahadi's and you're brought back to a time when the local grocer knew his customers—and that's because the convivial and loquacious Charlie does know his customers. "When I ask my customers how their son or daughter is, it's not because I try to pass the time, but because I really know them." And that's another point Charlie makes, "I think of my customers first as friends, second as customers."

On any given day that the store is open, you'll find Charlie chatting with friends, helping customers find what they're looking for, mopping up a spill, or helping to bag groceries. Whatever needs to get done, he will do. He emphasizes that he's not like other business owners who choose to separate themselves from their customers: "Without them, we'd have nothing." And Charlie encourages his staff to embrace his philosophy of treating the customers well. "I get upset if my customers aren't greeted when they enter the door. I want their experience to be a pleasant one. I tell my staff, 'You're not doing the customers a favor, they're doing you a favor.'"

Charlie's dedication to his customers goes further than his daily presence and the words he speaks. His commitment is reflected in the way the store is run. Unlike other specialty stores, Sahadi's offers some products in bulk. From beans and nuts to olives and spices, customers have the freedom to purchase as little or as much as they want. Of course, this approach has not always worked out for the store. One-on-one attention to customers takes more time. "There was once this woman who came into the store and bought an ounce of twenty spices to fill her spice jars. Twenty minutes and \$13 later, she was done." But there was a long line of irritated customers waiting after her. Always one to respond to the clients, Sahadi's tweaked the system to make everyone's shopping experience more time-efficient and pleasant. "As an owner, it takes years to build customers, but it takes only a minute for a customer to ruin a business." These are words from a wise man, but Charlie is quick to respond, "I've never been the greatest student, but I'm blessed to have common sense." The sixty-four-year-old adds, "I enjoy helping people. When I retire I want to tutor people going into business. I have forty-five years of practical experience to offer!"

Charlie and his family have made Sahadi's one of those places where, if you stop a moment to ponder, you might realize: Yes, this is quintessentially New York, and, yes, this is what all the hype is about. Sahadi's has established itself as a New York institution because it reflects the city and all of its diversity, charm, flavors, and sensibilities—and we, as New Yorkers, would not have it served to us any other way.

Sahadi's Specialty & Fine Foods
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