



Trio of former Army engineer officers cultivating business in Afghanistan

By Sarah Sekula

IN THE BLAZE OF an Afghanistan summer, cracked earth and hot, dry winds make it difficult to imagine any plant being able to flourish. Once October rolls around, though, it's a whole different story. In field after field, green sprigs of saffron spring up and eventually blossom.

"You can smell it before you can see it, fields of brilliantly purple flowers with the most intoxicatingly sweet and invigorating aroma you can imagine," says Keith Alaniz, a U.S. Army veteran and co-founder of Rumi Spice.

Once they reach their peak, the saffron plants are plucked from the ground in the wee hours, just as the dew sets in and before they wilt from the sun. After that, it's a painstaking process separating red-colored stigmas from purple crocus petals, stamens and the rest of the flower.

"Each saffron thread is a handpicked stigma from the crocus sativus flower,"

Alaniz says. "And there are only three stigmas per bloom. It takes a staggering 75,000 flowers to produce just one pound of saffron. All of these stigmas are picked, processed and cleaned by hand."

Alaniz is a saffron aficionado, and it all began during a four-year Army stint in Afghanistan. There, he and Rumi Spice co-founders Kim Jung and Emily Miller met saffron farmers who longed for a way to sell their crops on the international market.

Jung recalls one farmer, Haji Yosef, in particular. "He was such a hustler," she says. "He had a CD full of marketing videos and photos of his farm. And he was trying to sell to organizations like USAID or NGOs. But those were not the right people; he needed to be connected to (supermarket and restaurant buyers), but there was just no way that he could do that."

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KEITH ALANIZ
co-founder



KIM JUNG
co-founder



EMILY MILLER
co-founder

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— KEITH ALANIZ, RUMI SPICE CO-FOUNDER



Harvesting Afghan saffron fields

RUMI SPICE

With 85 percent of the country’s population relying on farming, Alaniz’s job would be to create a demand for Afghanistan agricultural products. “I realized that we needed to help the rural populace of Afghanistan and provide opportunities for them to thrive,” he says.

But how could he connect Afghan farmers with restaurants in the U.S.? Fortunately, saffron threads are tiny and lightweight, so they were easy to take back to Boston where all three co-founders were living at the time. There, they sold it at farmers markets and introduced it to local chefs.

“I remember the first time we bought saffron from the farmers,” Jung says. “It came in a cardboard box wrapped in string. At that moment, we knew that what we were doing was connecting Afghan farmers to the market; we were turning that cardboard box into treasure.”

By 2014, Rumi Spice was officially a business.

HOT COMMODITY

Saffron has long been a prized possession. Cleopatra luxuriated in saffron-infused baths; Alexander the Great used it to treat battle wounds. In Spain, it’s an essential ingredient for any respectable paella. It’s been used as a way to ward off melancholy, as an antioxidant and an anti-inflammatory.

With so many uses, it’s easy to see why saffron was as expensive as gold for centuries. And it’s no surprise that in the 21st century, it still costs a pretty penny.

“It is considered one of the world’s most valuable spices because it is only grown in a few regions, it only blooms once per year and it has to be harvested by hand,” Alaniz says.

The cost, of course, varies based on the spice’s purity. For Rumi saffron, which is considered the highest quality, 1 kilogram will set you back approximately \$2,400. It’s more valuable than truffles, caviar and premium vanilla beans.

Rumi Spice employs 4,000 Afghan women during any given harvest. “Although the Taliban are trying to eliminate women from the public space, they could not keep them from working in the saffron industry or the spice industry in general because they are such an integral part,” Alaniz says. “We were the first to employ women at this scale, and because of that we’ve created an incredible resiliency in the industry.”

“I’m very proud that what we’re doing is not a handout, it is a hand up,” he says. “We are simply trading value for value, and it provides so much dignity to our suppliers.”

BEYOND SAFFRON

The company’s story began with saffron, but it has expanded beyond it. In 2019, Alaniz returned to Afghanistan in search of the company’s next spice: wild foraged black cumin. It amounted to two years of research, genomic testing and a

preliminary discovery trip where he met wholesalers in Kabul.

Alaniz traveled to the Hindu Kush mountains in Badakhshan province, where the black cumin was foraged by women in remote villages. “We’re very proud that we source directly from these villagers, making us the only company to source this unique product at its origin,” he says.

From there, Rumi Spice opened up the market for similarly wild foraged spices from other parts of the country. The company now offers 20 products to restaurants across the U.S., and nearly a dozen of its products are sold in stores nationwide, including Whole Foods Market.

Turns out, there’s a robust customer base seeking high-quality spices. Michelin-star chefs, for example, now sing Rumi’s praises — but not without some initial cajoling.

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Case in point: Early on, Jung met with Marc Forgione, a Michelin-star chef with an eponymous restaurant in New York, who appeared set to brush her off.

But when she opened a jar of saffron about 15 feet away from him, within seconds “He said, ‘Give me that. I want that,’” she recalls. “It was amazing because what that meant was the saffron speaks for itself — it ‘smelled’ for itself, it was so fragrant and so fresh.”

“We focused early on selling to chefs as our first customers,” Alaniz says. “They truly recognized the distinct difference in our spices.” That includes Michelin-starred restaurants like Daniel in New York City and The French Laundry in Yountville, Calif., he says, and “(we) are happy to still count them as customers to this day.”

GROWTH SPURT

Spice as a force for good is a story that the media would latch onto. Case in point: Rumi Spice’s innovative ways have been featured in *The Boston Globe*, *Chicago Tribune*, *The New York Times* and on NPR. When the founders appeared on *Shark Tank* in 2017, billionaire Mark Cuban decided to invest.

Before the growth spurt, though, it was a struggle. “When most people hear the word Afghanistan, they think war and terrorism and opium,” Alaniz says. “I experienced war, sure, but I also saw a different side of Afghanistan. I knew the country as a beautiful place with varied climates and terrain — mountains, deserts, lush valleys.”

It was also a place of incredible cuisine and hospitable people always honored to have him as a guest. “It was new and innovative,” he remembers. “At the same time, it reminded me of sitting down to dinner at my grandmother’s house.”

It wasn’t easy convincing investors to believe in a business operating out of a war zone. The earliest investors were those willing to bet on the founders because of their military backgrounds. “I always got the question, ‘What happens if the Taliban takes over?’” Alaniz says. “My answer would always be, ‘Nothing.’ We have nothing to do with the U.S. government or the Afghan government. We’re conducting business like it has been done for thousands of years along the Silk Road.”

The Taliban have taken over, “and although I wish this wasn’t the case, I have been proven right,” he says.

EMPOWERING AFGHANS

When Rumi Spice came along, farmers had a reason to switch from growing opium to raising saffron.

Some estimates show opium accounts for 40 percent of Afghanistan’s GDP, but saffron generates “up to seven times more income than growing poppy for opium,” Jung says.

“It is easy to convince them to make the switch because saffron is less work in terms of farming, and Rumi (Spice) provides at least 1.5 times a living wage, much more than farmers can get for even an illegal narcotic,” says Alaniz, who estimates that “over two-thirds of our farmers have switched from opium to saffron farming.”

It’s a crop — and a product — that the farmers are proud of.

In the beginning, Jung says, the farmers would not shake her hand because it’s not customary to do so. Fast forward a few years and the farmers were taking selfies with her and participating in the creation of product marketing content.

“They understood the power of the narrative, the power of the story and the relationship between the Afghan farmers and the American business people to bring income to their families,” she says.

Alaniz recalls giving a group of farmers its first glimpse of what the finished product looked like on store shelves.

“They passed the product around as we explained what it said. When I pointed to and read the words “product of Afghanistan,” it brought tears of pride to their eyes,” he says.

