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From the far side of the world to the corner of your street

How migrant small businesses contribute to Australian neighbourhoods

by Trish Prentice





The author

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By any measure, small businesses are an important part of the Australian economy. Described as the country’s economic “backbone”ⁱ, small enterprises accounted for more than a third of Australia’s gross domestic product in 2019.ⁱⁱ In recent years they have created \$414 billion of industrial valueⁱⁱⁱ and employed 44 percent of Australia’s workforce.^{iv} More than 97 percent of employing businesses are small businesses.^v These tiny economic building blocks are playing a huge role in Australia’s economic performance.

Yet while the economic value of small businesses is widely recognised, we know much less about the people who own them and about the social contributions they make in our communities. Who are the people behind the businesses that play such a pivotal role in Australia’s economy? What forces led them into small businesses creation or ownership and how are these businesses adding value to Australia in more than economic terms?

More than one third of Australia’s small businesses—about 620,000 of them—are run by first- or second-generation migrants.^{vi} Interestingly, more than 80 percent of these small business owners did not own a business before coming to Australia.^{vii} What was it about their experience of establishing a new life here that led them into the small business sector? How is the uniqueness these ‘new Australians’ bring, whether culturally, linguistically, religiously or through other forms of diversity, shaping our communities?

This essay aims to explore these questions by describing the experiences of several small business owners from first- and second-generation migrant backgrounds. While their stories cannot be indicative of every small business owner, they shed light into the complex and diverse factors that

can lead migrants or their children to work in small business, and the push-and-pull factors that motivate individuals from these backgrounds to step into the sector. At a time when small businesses will play a key role in Australia’s ongoing economic recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic, it is timely to reflect on their wider contribution to Australian society, and to hear the stories of those who run them.

Neighbourhood ‘Great Good Places’

In his 1989 book, *The Great Good Place*^{viii}, American sociologist Ray Oldenburg reflected on the coffee shops, beauty parlors, general stores and other locales that sit at the heart of communities. While we might frequent these small businesses for a particular purpose — to buy a coffee or get a haircut — it is the relationships we build within them that keep us coming back.^{ix} Oldenburg argues that these ‘third places’^x are essential to our communities. They provide local belonging and connectedness; we build informal relationships^{xi} with the owner, the employees that work there and the other ‘regulars’.^{xii} These spaces fundamentally connect us to our neighbourhoods.^{xiii} Unlike home or the workplace, where we fulfill certain social roles, they are neutral ground on which our “[w]orldly status...[is] checked at

the door.”^{xiv} We come to them voluntarily, simply as a member of the community. In this way they are also social levellers,^{xv} places where we engage with one another as equals.^{xvi}

Decades ago, Australia’s Great Good Places were the country store or the post office.^{xvii} They served as informal village centres, places that everyone in the area would drop into regularly, in large part for information, gossip, or to find out what was going on in the local community. Everyone knew the store owner or the postmaster, and these people knew everyone. Today, our ‘villages’ are much more spread out but there remain hubs of local small business in our suburbs. The place we go to buy milk, fill a prescription or get a newspaper. Where we can grab a coffee and the barista knows our face and even our name, and sneaks a marshmallow to the kids.^{xviii} Where the windows are plastered with advertisements for community events. The heart and soul of our local area.

When Oldenburg wrote *The Great Good Place: Cafes, Coffee Shops, Community Centers, General Stores, Bars, Hangouts, and How They Get You through the Day*, he was deeply interested in how urban spaces work. He was convinced that third places are essential for meeting our human need to connect with others, that they help us to stay psychologically, socially and culturally healthy.^{xix} Without them, our lives and our neighbourhoods would be impoverished.^{xx}

These are the stories of some of our neighbourhood Great Good Places, the people who operate them and the journey that led them to the small business sector. While many of the interviews took place in Melbourne, Great Good Places can be found in all Australian neighbourhoods.

John

It was John’s uncle Enzo Lucchini who established the original Lucchinis cake store on Lygon Street, Melbourne, in 1952, but he didn’t start off as a cake maker. Italian by birth, when Enzo came of age he was sent to Cairo, the centre of the world from his perspective, to learn the hospitality trade. He spent time in various hotels, in Cairo and later London, rising eventually to become head waiter, before coming to Australia in the 1950s in the waves of migration that took place in the wake of World War II. Enzo settled in Carlton, as many Italians did at that time, and took up the position of head waiter at the Menzies Hotel in the city. However, Enzo was an entrepreneur at heart and recognised an opportunity when he saw one. Observing the obvious success of the espresso bars that had sprung up on Lygon street, servicing their mainly Italian clientele, he noticed there were no Italian cake shops in the area. He established Lucchinis to satisfy local residents’ sweet cravings for the rich continental cakes of their homeland.

John came into the business in the early 1970s. Like his uncle, it wasn’t his first chosen career path. After finishing high school, he enrolled in a double degree

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in Law and Commerce at the University of Melbourne, but into his second year of university he found he just wasn't enjoying his studies. John had always been involved in Lucchinis —as a teenager he'd worked casually at the Lygon Street shop (although he'd been drawn more by the serving girls, rather than any altruistic motivation). He returned to the family business thinking he'd take a break from university and consider his options. He never left.

John became a partner at Lucchinis at a time when business was starting to drop off. Many original Italian residents of Carlton and Fitzroy had started to move from the inner city to the suburbs, settling in places like Lalor and Preston where they could buy a block of land with more room. Lucchinis was already providing cakes to several stalls at the newly established Preston Market and demand for their products was growing there when the opportunity arose to purchase a small cake shop at the market. But there was a catch—the little market stall came with an established bakery on High Street and the two would only be sold together. While it had been the partners' intentions to continue baking on Lygon Street and to transport the products each day to the new store in Preston, it seemed that wasn't to be—baking could take place on the premises. They bought the whole lot and have been there ever since.

John became manager of the Preston shop. He found Preston to be very cosmopolitan. There were the Italians who had newly bought into the area but other 'new Australians' as well—Yugoslavs, Greeks, Macedonians and Spaniards. They all loved Lucchinis' rich, continental cakes, best eaten at the end of a meal, with an espresso. The cannoli were a particular favourite.

John had always kept up with the trade journals and when the business slowed again in the early 1990s, he scoured them for new ideas to diversify the business. He thought Sydney had always been one step ahead of Melbourne and he noticed that many cake shops up there were putting in cappuccino machines and doing sandwiches to get more business. Following in his uncle's footsteps by seizing a gap in the market, John opened up Lucchinis in Preston to the coffee and cake and lunch crowd. Not content with simply sandwiches, it offered gourmet focaccias and paninis and later introduced pasta, pies, pasties and sausage rolls. Today, Lucchinis is very much a café, with seating for 60 to 70 people, offering breakfast and lunch, traditional Italian cakes—the mainstay of the business—and a range of Danish pastries and croissants, the perfect accompaniment to a coffee. John says they are still keeping ahead of the trends. Their latest creation is a

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ricotta Danish, “to die for” with a cappuccino. He thinks they may be the only ones with a ricotta Danish in Melbourne.

For John, running Lucchinis has never been just a job but something he loves. He’s always loved food and sweets—his whole family does—but he loves people as well. Building relationships with those who come to Lucchinis is part of his core business. After 47 years of operation in Preston, they have a lot of regulars. In John’s words, “our tentacles extend far.”

People keep coming back, he says, not only for the quality of their food, but for the relationship.

We have quite a few customers in their 70s and 80s who are quite mobile and that was the highlight of the week coming in to us, coming in with their carers...

Even if one of our customers moves out of the region, they always come back during the year to see us. They might be coming back to go to the dentist or to get their car serviced or going to the hairdresser across the road and so they come and see us. All the regulars have been coming in for years and years.

Looking back, John feels very fortunate. Although the business has had its ups and downs, he’s never dreaded coming in to work. For him, it has been fun. At 71 years of age, John considers himself semi-retired, ready to hand over the reins to the third generation of family members already involved in the business. His son is working with him as a pastry chef

and his daughter has a real gift with people.

A couple of nieces also work with them part time. After so many years in the business John has dropped back to four days a week. He’s ready to take things a bit easier. But he’ll never give up his passion for his café and the people who come to it.

It’s about making money, of course if we weren’t making money there would be no point to being there, but it’s also about the connection. We talk about the way the world is going. We gauge the feeling of the community. We talk politics—which doesn’t always go well—we talk football, we talk food. It’s just beautiful.

Haipei

Haipei, who was born in Beijing, China, says she feels very fortunate that her husband’s support has given her the financial freedom to pursue her interest in alternative medical treatments. That support has enabled her to study different practices, leading to the establishment of her own “urban health sanctuary.” For her, establishing the business was the natural outcome of a journey that has spanned more than 20 years and four different countries.

She always had a deep interest in healing and helping others, so the move into Chinese medicine came “very naturally into her life.” At that time the Chinese government was offering free university study, as part of Deng Xiaoping’s widespread educational reforms beginning in the 1980s, so after secondary

school, Haipei took the opportunity to study a double bachelor's degree in economics and Chinese medicine, specialising in acupoint needling in her third year. Her clinical placement took her to Beijing International Acupuncture Training Center, part of the Beijing Hospital of Traditional Chinese Medicine, one of the world's largest hospital networks, where she completed her apprenticeship.

Eventually a desire to see the world took Haipei to Japan, where she used her economics background to secure a part-time job. But she stayed interested in Chinese medicine, and in a fortunate turn of events, she encountered a Chinese expert in acupoint needling living in Tokyo. Haipei seized the opportunity to continue her studies under him and to hone the practices she had learned in Beijing.

Some years later Haipei and her husband Erik moved to Sri Lanka, where he had work. There she learned a new form of alternative treatment called Ayurveda, based around knowledge of plants, herbs and oils. After completing her studies in this practice, Haipei established a clinic on their property in the centre of

Colombo. The networks they established with other expats brought many people to Haipei, seeking help for different problems and curious about alternative treatment methods. They spread the word through their networks, bringing more and more people to the clinic.

When Haipei and her family moved again—this time to Australia—she returned to study, adding muscle therapy, dry needling and myotherapy to her repertoire. Her desire to help people led her back to clinical practice, and with advice from trusted friends and the Whitehorse City Council she established Reset Me in her local neighbourhood of Mitcham. The centre brings together the three pillars of her practice—traditional Chinese medicine, Ayurveda and the various methodologies of myotherapy.

At first, many of her clients were from Chinese backgrounds: from mainland China, Hong Kong and Taiwan or from Singapore or Malaysia. Like Haipei, they were familiar with Chinese medicine. But that has changed:



If someone wants to come into this kind of business and survive [...], then you need to have sincere compassion for the people who come to you.

As the kids started school and I developed relationships with different families, my clients started to include Australians who were born here and have lived here all their life. As I got to know them and they got to know me they learned more about what it was about. For some of them I was able to solve very long terms issues so gradually my clients have evolved from Chinese background to 'Aussie' background and all kinds of backgrounds, including new migrants. They all come to me, not just Chinese people only.

Today, Haipei's practice is busy. Although she has a website and engages with social media, her clients tend to come via word of mouth. Part of this, Haipei says, is the power of the practice.

They spread the word because its effective. They want a result. They want relief from what they are suffering... More than 60 percent of my clients are female. But from these clients come their husbands, their brothers or other family members.

For Haipei, understanding the human body is like learning another language. It's a bit like learning English, she says. "There is a different language I need to become familiar with to understand what is happening inside. So I listen and understand."

Haipei can speak of many treatment success stories but despite them, she does not feel she has reached the end of her learning journey. Her desire to continuously improve draws her back to China several times a year to keep abreast of new developments in treatment, and she maintains relationships with those she calls "her gurus". This knowledge feeds back into her business, where she continually refines her practice. For Haipei, alternative medicine has no

borders. She isn't constrained by labels like Chinese medicine or Sri Lankan medicine. She can draw on all her experience and learning to help people.

If someone wants to come into this kind of business and survive, especially in a place like Australia where there is only a small market for alternative treatments, then you need to have sincere compassion for the people who come to you. You need to care about human beings and human bodies. I think that is a key factor.

Ifrah

Ifrah had always wanted to run a small business. Her mother had been a business owner and she'd always thought she'd like to own one too, but it wasn't until people from her community were coming to her each day to ask for advice that she took the plunge.

Ifrah was born in Somalia. During the civil war her family migrated to New Zealand. Five years later they relocated to Australia, settling in Melbourne in 2000, then moving on to Brisbane, where the weather was warmer. Ifrah attended school on and off. As the eldest girl in her family, she needed to help her mother who was working to support the family financially. Her growing up years were spent "studying and nannying, studying and nannying" she laughs. After school she worked in childcare for a while, then moved on to study health and nutrition. She began to be known in the Somali community as the person to go to when people had questions about food. Many families were struggling to locate the ingredients they used for cooking in Somalia, usually bought fresh each day from local markets:

In Somalia, people always eat fresh organic food but in Australia it is less easy to come by, or people don't know where to find it, so they just end up buying produce from the supermarket instead.

As often happens, it soon became known through word of mouth that Ifrah knew where to buy the things people needed, so they came to her seeking help or advice. Ifrah stepped into small business ownership as a way to support herself and help her community. As well as a need to source certain products and ingredients, some local Somalis were having health problems caused by high sugar diets and compounded by a change in lifestyle in Australia.

Sugar is always high in my community and when we come here sugar is available everywhere. Over there you can have sugar but you burn it up because everything is manual. For example, there is no dishwasher, there is no washing machine. We don't have cars. It all involves labour. These people they have no idea. They say since we have come here, we have lots of things, and so they eat. They don't realise it's not the same as back home.

Hoping to bring about change, she established Oskar Vitamin Café in Moorooka, a combined health food store and café. She offers organic produce, health supplements, vitamins, herbal teas and plant milk. A naturopath is also on site. The café is open for breakfast lunch and dinner, offering a range of freshly cooked and healthy meals. Customers will often come in for a coffee or a meal and stay for a chat. She recalls one conversation with a Somali man

who came in and ordered a small cappuccino with five sugars. She asked him “are you ordering coffee or are you ordering sugar?” It led to an interesting conversation about health and diet. Another man came into the shop and was browsing. She asked him if he'd like to sample one of their specials. He agreed, and shared with her that he hadn't eaten for two days. Since then, whenever he comes in the staff know to give him whatever he would like to eat. These interactions are so important to Ifrah. They are memories she holds on to fondly and talks about proudly.

These days Ifrah doesn't see her approach to health and nutrition as something that is just relevant to the Somali community. Both her staff and customers come from diverse backgrounds. She named her business after her grandfather, Askar, who is quite well known among Somalis, and she knew the familiarity would bring in customers from the community. However, since she runs the only health food store in her suburb, the business draws in other local residents, keen to try her specialties, which include acai bowls, falafel wraps, protein balls and health elixirs. Passers-by are attracted by her front window styling but word of mouth also brings many. They come back because the business offers good food and sound advice.

It is advice that Ifrah herself lives by, as do her staff. She often reminds them, “in order to serve people healthy food, it starts with us.”

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Raizel

Raizel’s parents were holocaust survivors. They moved to Australia in the early 1950s and established St Kilda Kosher Poultry Supply on what is today known as St Kilda Road. The business was their first and it was challenging. However, they worked hard and soon their business was thriving, providing fresh kosher poultry and hot barbequed chicken to Melbourne’s Jewish community. The cooked chicken was particularly popular as store-bought cooked kosher food was a rarity at the time.^{xxi}

Some years later the business was passed on to Raizel and her husband, Yankel. They diversified their offerings, bringing in new produce and ready-to-eat products, with a focus on good quality fresh food. They renamed the business Eshel—an acronym that stands for eating, sleeping and accompanying guests to their next destination—and moved to their current shop front in Ripponlea. The sense of care and hospitality that their name embodies drives everything they do, from the quality of their food, to their attention to detail and willingness to accommodate any request, large or small.

Eshel is one of a number of small businesses that were established to meet the needs of Melbourne’s Jewish community. It specialises in kosher food — food designated as “fit or proper” — that has been prepared and cooked from ingredients that meet the requirements of Jewish law. Religious Jewish communities believe that eating non-kosher food has spiritual ramifications, so establishments such as Eshel are essential for the daily practice of their beliefs.

Eshel has grown beyond serving its original community, now interwoven into the fabric of Ripponlea. Its shopfront has become a well-known institution, featured not only on websites touting the best Jewish food in Melbourne but in foodie guides aimed at local connoisseurs. It is known for its classic, Polish-influenced Jewish food, as well as for its wide variety of kosher ready-to-eat products. While many people come for its food and service, others come because they have questions about the Jewish community, a visible presence in this inner suburb. Raizel and her family welcome these conversations and see them as a positive aspect of their daily business. A few years ago, her family were featured as part of the SBS documentary series,

Strictly Jewish, which explored life as a member of the Adass Israel community, “Australia’s most ultra-Orthodox Jewish sect.”^{xxiii} The documentary opened a window into the daily lives of community members such as Raizel and her family who live a strictly Jewish life. It drew many viewers to Ripponlea who were curious to find out more. That interest hasn’t waned completely. There are still conversations to be had.

For Raizel and her family, “Eshel is definitely a meeting place for people to get to know one another.”

Mostafa

Mostafa decided to leave Iran in 2015. He and his family were not in danger. He was a civil engineer, specialising in high rise residential apartment blocks and commercial buildings. Such was his reputation that he was often called upon to give evidence as a court expert. His work was steady. He and his wife Saeedah, a lawyer, owned their house, and their eldest child was at school. But everything was a fight; every day involved a careful navigation through the rules and regulations imposed by the regime. The daily tiptoeing took a mental toll, and it was always possible that the tenuous political situation could change without notice. Mostafa wasn’t sure it was a future he wanted for his children.

He chose Australia because of its multicultural reputation. He believed it would be a country that would welcome them as its own.

Mostafa applied for a temporary business visa and when it was granted, moved the family to Melbourne in 2016. He knew no one, except for a nephew studying at the University of Sydney. He planned to open a construction business, but soon after he arrived, he found out that his migration agent had given him “wrong information” about the nature of the work he could do under his visa conditions. He could work in construction but only on residential housing, not on the larger scale projects he was used to doing. The family had packed up and left Iran based on the agent’s word. Now they were in a new country without a means of financial support.

Mostafa spent the next two to three months looking for an alternative while the family lived on their savings. His business experience in Iran led him to consider a small business but many of the options required skills he could not acquire easily. He eventually settled on a small suburban fish and chip shop in Croydon, Melbourne, one that appeared to be making a reasonable turnover, although he soon found the financial figures he had been given were not entirely accurate.

The first few weeks were challenging. The shop’s customers were loyal to the previous owner and he was an unknown quantity. They didn’t know his food or its quality. He also knew very little of English or the local culture — both key, in his mind, to the business succeeding.

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At that time I was new. I didn't know Australian culture. Communication, culture. Everything is important. But at that time I didn't know anything.

He gave himself six months to learn the business and turn things around. After that “it would be my fault” if the business was not profitable, he said to himself.

Although he had never run a takeaway shop, Mostafa applied the same strategies he had used in construction to solve problems he encountered. He reduced his expenditure. He decided to renovate the flat above the shop so his family could move in upstairs. He started asking his customers for feedback on the food. Listening to what they told him, he changed the quality of the oil and introduced homemade chips (instead of a frozen product). He and Saeedah started making the burgers, and then all products, from scratch. Today everything is made in house and the business is stable. He still takes customer feedback very seriously, “If they are happy they tell me. If they like the food they come back.”

Mostafa is building relationships with his customers, many of whom are on a first name basis. Online reviews often mention him by name. These interactions also shape the business: he wants it to be

driven by local needs. He intends to introduce Persian food sometime soon, not because he has Iranian customers but because the locals ask for it.

My customers are interested in Persian food. Many of my customers know Persian food and they ask why I don't cook Persian food. They are interested in kebabs.

If I knew what I know now, I would have changed the shop to a Persian food shop in the beginning but at that time I didn't know and I couldn't take the risk.

However, the uncertainty surrounding Mostafa’s family’s future has continued in Australia.

We've had problems with our visa in the past year, which has taken time away from the business. There is a lot of work to do for it. Most of my spare time is spent on the visa.

When Mostafa applied for a permanent business visa, he learned that the previous owner had received his permanent residency based on ownership of the fish and chip shop. This prevented Mostafa from using the business as a basis for their visa claim. The only solution, his migration agent suggested, was to buy a second business, so they purchased an Italian



When we came to Australia, we found out it is quite different for working than what we expected. If I had known how hard it was, I would have come 10 years ago.

restaurant in the suburb of Camberwell, about half an hour away. He now runs two businesses. It is a scenario quite different to the one he envisioned when leaving Iran.

For Mostafa and Saeedah, the last four years have been a steep learning curve for them and there is still much about 'the system' that is unknown.

When we came to Australia, we found out it is quite different for working than what we expected. If I had known how hard it was, I would have come 10 years ago.

I have learnt a lot in this time. The work system, the financial system are all different to Iran. There is not one similarity. Everything is different...So we have learned a lot through experience.

Yet Mostafa is proud of what he has achieved so far. He has built up a loyal customer base and been responsive to his customers' feedback. Both businesses are profitable and the work is familiar. They have introduced Mesopotamian food, inspired by Kurdish cuisine, at the second business. It is a unique drawcard, something not offered elsewhere, and the customers have responded favourably and are coming back.

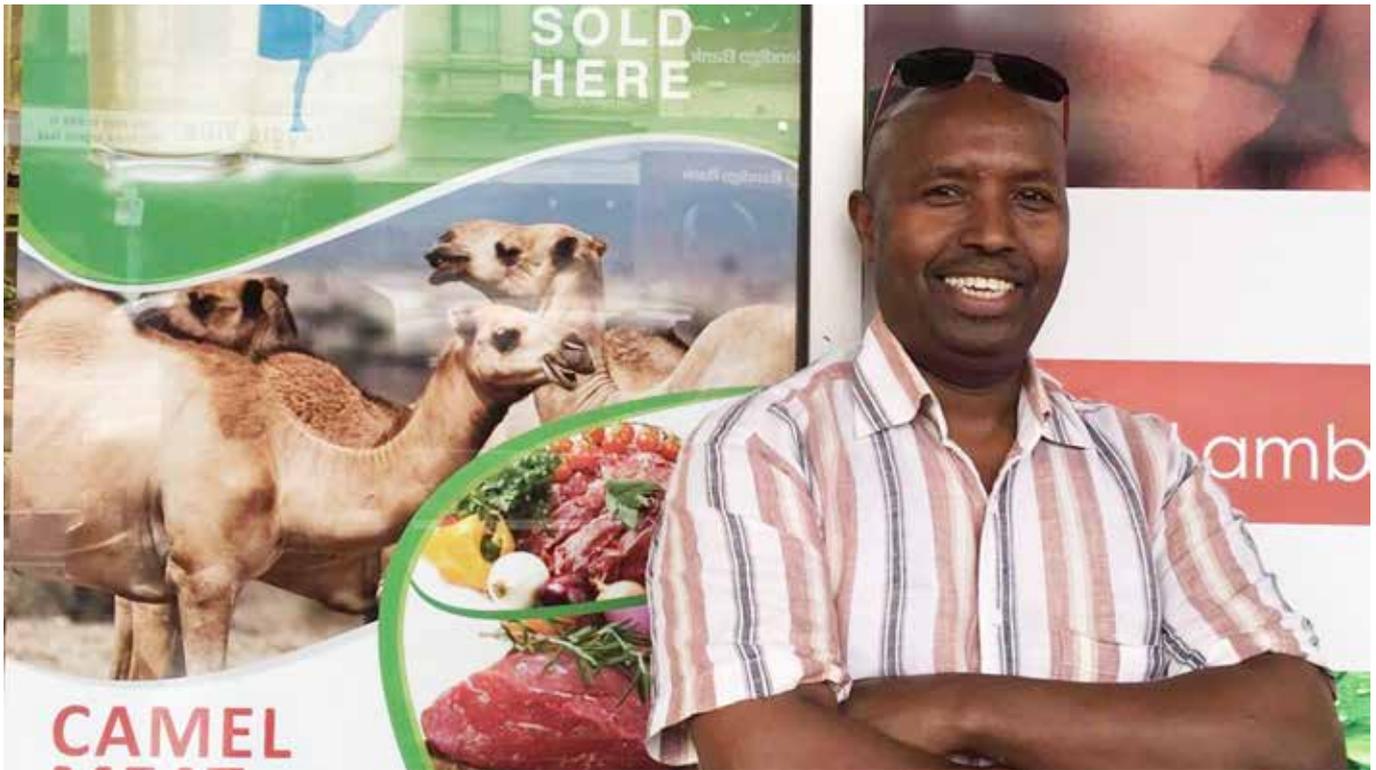
However, running a small business does not fulfil him in the same way his previous work did: "I do this work well but I think if I did professional work I would do it better." His future will be determined, one way or another, by his visa outcome. "For now, I am waiting."

Abukar

Abukar arrived in Australia from Turkey on a Friday and started working on Monday. He was young, only 17 or 18 at the time. Thinking back, he believes he didn't really have a choice. There was no time to settle in or get his bearings before beginning work. "When you move from country to country as a result of a civil war, you need to take the opportunities that are given to you," he says.

Abukar worked in the textiles industry for almost two decades but when the industry lost its tariff protection and began to be moved offshore,^{xxiii} he found himself redundant. He drove taxis for a while but didn't really enjoy the work so he started looking for other opportunities. A few Turkish friends owned butcher shops, and they encouraged him to consider it. He decided to make an offer on a butchery in Footscray but the price was high and his offer was rejected. Then an opportunity came up in Flemington. Abukar took one look at the towering high-rise apartment blocks surrounding the butcher shop, sensed the opportunity for business, and made a snap decision. He just knew it was right. "It was like one plus one equalled two," he recalls.

The owner was tired, going through a divorce and facing a myriad of personal issues, so the two quickly agreed on a price. But Abukar had a problem. He'd never worked with meat before. He had little idea of the difference between tenderloin and a chop and even less idea of how to extract those cuts from a piece of lamb. What he did have was a determination to learn.



He hired a butcher to run the meat side of the business and to train him but those early years were hard. Not only was he learning a new craft but how to run a business. He almost went bankrupt once, then twice. He remembers going to the abattoir and saying to them, “If I die, you die and then we both die. So give me another chance.” He negotiated to put aside the sizable debt he’d accrued in unpaid meat and let him have deliveries on a cash-on-delivery basis. Once the business was making a profit again, he’d start chipping away the debt, he told them. That’s exactly what he did.

Today the business is profitable, founded on a backbone of hard work and significant financial investment. Abukar invests in good quality meat. It’s a core business strategy:

At the end of the day people want good quality. If you give them bad quality meat or chicken, they might give you one chance and come again but after that they will walk away. There is too much competition from other shops. If you always give good meat, it doesn’t matter who they are, they just want good quality meat. Quality meat is number one.

Yet, it is not only the product, he believes, that makes a business. Personal presence, he says, is also crucial.

You always have to be there. This business is a small business. It is not only a small business, it is you. So the trust people have is placed in you. The people who come want me to serve them. Even though I have eight employees now, at the end of the day people just want me to serve them. I give them what they want. It is their trust in me, that is what I have built. My success comes from there.

These days the shop draws in a diverse clientele. Although it offers halal meat, Abukar’s customers are not only Muslim. “I have everyone. My shop is just like any other shop.” He recalls in those early days a “Greek guy” coming to the shop and ordering lamb for a spit. He was so pleased with the meat he told all his family and friends. It led to an influx of orders from the Greek community for Easter. Today, Easter is still one of Abukar’s busiest times of the year. Abukar puts it down to a cultural tendency to rely on word of mouth.

You know we are all migrants so we all talk. We all have a similar culture. Word of mouth is important. It's not like in Australia where people look up which company is better or use a phone book. The Greeks and Italians and people from migrant backgrounds all go with their family and friends. They don't tend to get information from the media, they get it from themselves. From their people. This is the best advertising. If people come to me and I look after them, they tell other people.

Abukar has made a lot of friends along the way. He goes to his customers' weddings and christenings. He asks them about their families. They talk and he listens and he's not slow to offer advice. So much so that he's nicknamed his business Melbourne University.

I give people advice and they take my advice on board and come back to me and say things turned out absolutely fantastic. I don't just sell meat. I say, 'How are you, how is your family, how are the kids?', and when you talk to people like this, they tell you, 'Oh my son broke his leg, or I have this problem,' or 'I have this thing or that thing,' so you get all this information and you know how their world is. You see, we are all the same. Green, yellow, white, we are all the same. We all have good things, we all have bad things.

For Abukar, the learning goes both ways. He is very much a student of his own 'university.'

I learn their culture. I learn so many things. There are a lot of things you can get from a small business. You are directly involved in the issues of the community. The good, the bad and the ugly, you see everything. Everything we learn comes from other people. It is the medicine we provide. We all become teachers.

One thing he has taught his customers is what it means for meat to be halal.

People don't know what halal meat is but it is just lack of information. They don't know halal is quite similar to kosher – it just means draining the blood. They think the meat comes from the Middle East or from Africa. They ask me, where does this meat come from? I tell them it comes from Bendigo. It comes from Kyneton. It comes from Ballarat. They slaughter it and drain the blood and then it becomes halal. That's all. Lamb is lamb. It comes from the same place. It even comes from the same farm.

Although the work is demanding and often challenging, Abukar believes his choice to move into small business has been good one.

Small business is an amazing thing. It's hard. It's more than a job, but it's worth it.

This is my castle.

The contributions of small business owners from migrant backgrounds

Individuals come to own small businesses for many reasons. Some, like John and Haipei, are pulled into the sector by a love of what they do and a desire to share it with others. Some, like Ifrah and Raizel's family, are aware of a community need and step in to meet it. Some are motivated by "personal ambition",^{xxiv} "a sense of achievement"^{xxv} or by a need to have "greater personal control over their affairs".^{xxvi} Others, like Abukar and Mostafa, are pushed by economic factors, such as a lack of work or exclusion from other employment pathways. Research suggests this experience is common: 16 percent

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of small business owners from diverse cultural backgrounds move into small business because they cannot access other employment.^{xxvii} Individuals from Middle Eastern and Asian backgrounds are reported to face particular difficulties, having to submit twice the amount of job applications as other applicants to receive a call back from an employer.^{xxviii}

Other factors, such as a person’s previous employment,^{xxix} family context,^{xxx} gender,^{xxxi} educational attainment^{xxxii} or ethnic background can also play a role.^{xxxiii} Regardless of what draws people from diverse cultural backgrounds to small business, it is clear a great deal of hard work, long hours and a good dose of grit and determination goes into making the business successful. Small business owners from migrant backgrounds, especially those who are newly arrived, face greater challenges than other business owners. They must develop a good knowledge of the local culture, institutional environment and language, and legal and bureaucratic obstacles.^{xxxiv} Many, as Abukar experienced, struggle to stay solvent. There is much at stake when you have moved to a new country and invested personally and financially in the future you hope to build there.

Looking around our communities, we can see the contributions of migrant small businesses. Without

those who have come from other places and cultures to set down roots in this country, we would not have access to the diversity of goods and services we enjoy today. Food is an obvious contribution— John calls it “the great leveler”. Our neighborhoods are dotted with restaurants and take away shops offering everything from Chinese, Indian and Thai cuisine, to American burgers, Korean fried chicken or souvlaki. While these eateries may have been established to meet the needs of their respective communities, providing familiar tastes from ‘home’ or to meet particular dietary laws, they are now widely enjoyed. Cappuccinos, bubble tea, sushi and gelato are all contributions of the diverse communities who have chosen to make Australia home.

Other cultural contributions are also becoming more and more familiar in our neighborhoods. Ethnic grocery stores, such as Indian, Korean, Chinese, Sri Lankan or Middle Eastern supermarkets can be found in most Australian cities and in many suburbs. Again, these small businesses may have been established with their communities in mind, but Australia’s strong food culture brings to them a wider clientele seeking culturally authentic ingredients with which to build a dish. It is a mark of many modern Australian households to be able to cook a curry, stir fry or even sushi from scratch.

Alternative therapies are another important contribution. Twenty years ago, reflexology, acupuncture, Chinese, Thai or Swedish massage were virtually unheard of but now they are a common part of our small business landscape and are widely frequented for a myriad of different ‘ailments’. All of these contributions from culturally diverse small business owners add to the colour and richness of our neighborhoods and our lives. Most of the time we barely give their presence a thought.

Yet the social contributions that small businesses make to our communities and to our neighborhoods are even less recognised. While largely unnoticed, they can be incredibly powerful.

Ordinary encounters with cultural diversity

Today, many of our Great Good Places are run by small business owners who have come to call Australia home. Their businesses have become pillars of our neighbourhoods, loved and frequented by many. Some, like Lucchinis and Eshel, also draw visitors from other suburbs, while others, like Abukar’s butcher shop, Ifrah’s health café, Mostafa’s fish and chip shop and Haipei’s health centre are local secrets, known only to those who frequent them or who hear about them through word of mouth.

Wherever we live, these small businesses have the potential to shape our views and experience of cultural diversity. In these places we have the opportunity to establish a relationship with someone

from a background potentially different to our own, to expand our acquaintances outside our usual social circle.^{xxxv} There we meet on equal terms, neutral ground. As we do so, we are given the opportunity to challenge stereotypes we may carry, to chip away at the unconscious or conscious perception that this person is different from us.^{xxxvi} These ordinary interactions can lead to social harmony.^{xxxvii} They build relationships and create trust, two things that are essential to breaking down barriers and strengthening our social fabric. Everyday face-to-face encounters are a powerful way to build connection, even at the level of simple informal acquaintances. Relationship building is a powerful force against discrimination.^{xxxviii}

Yet the power of our Great Good Places works both ways. As they root us in our local communities, they also embed their owners in their neighbourhood. The relationships we establish with them, breaking through social and cultural barriers that might otherwise be present, help to foster ‘new Australians’ own sense of belonging and connectedness to people and place.^{xxxix} They are not simply vehicles for economic security or financial self-sufficiency for those who have come to call Australia home, although they are surely that and their importance in this regard should not be downplayed. They are also social spaces in which the business owners can build informal relationships that can add to their sense of neighbourhood connection. Places where the fostering of trust and reciprocity can lead to their owners feeling confident of their place in their local community.^{xl}

Today, many of our Great Good Places are run by small business owners who have come to call Australia home. Their businesses have become pillars of our neighbourhoods, loved and frequented by many.

Epilogue

As Australia emerges from the COVID-19 pandemic, a critical discussion about how best to aid Australia's economic and social recovery has begun. One pillar of this process, flagged by both government and industry, is the small business sector. Small businesses are key community employers and responsible for producing millions of dollars of gross domestic product. There are already indications that Australia's resilient, dynamic and determined small business sector is bouncing back.^{xli} However, small businesses will also play a role in our social recovery. They are essential for community building.^{xlii} Without them, "the urban environment fails to nourish the kinds of relationships and the diversity of human contact that are the essence of the city."^{xliii} The need for small businesses to play this role has never been greater than at this moment. Many of the lockdowns

and other steps that have been taken to safeguard our communities' health have taken a great toll and the social and psychological ramifications are only just coming to the surface. Our Great Good Places—our informal neighbourhood gathering places—will provide a place for many to reconnect and to heal.

Small businesses themselves have been impacted by the public health measures. Many were forced to close or to fundamentally change the way they do business, and while government payments have helped to keep many afloat, the social and economic impacts have still been significant. Community rebuilding will require us to support our local small businesses. Without them, our neighbourhoods would lack individuality and vitality. With these businesses and the people who run them, our communities have the colour and character that make them feel like home.



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