

Trends

Halal's Rise From Street Carts to Whole Foods

► Americans can't get enough chicken gyro with white sauce

► It could "be like kosher food, which is... fresher, more virtuous"

They came for the chicken platter with rice and the beef gyro with white and hot sauce. Almost 800 hungry customers waited at a shopping mall in King of Prussia, Pa., for as long as three hours on Oct. 1 for the grand opening of the newest outpost of **Halal Guys**, a

fast-food chain serving Middle Eastern- and Mediterranean-style fare.

"I saw pretty much every demographic there is, from college students to families, and every race," says Naveen Mohiuddin, the new franchise owner. The King of Prussia store is the 22nd Halal Guys to open in the U.S. over the past two years. The business started as a hot-dog cart on 53rd Street and Avenue of the Americas in Manhattan in the 1990s, before its three owners switched to halal food, prepared according to Muslim traditions that dictate the kind of meat used and how animals are slaughtered.

Mohiuddin's franchise is a sign of the growing appetite for halal food in the U.S. In 1998 there were about 200 halal restaurants and grocery stores, according to Shahed Amanullah, who's run an online list since then. Today there are about 7,600, he says. "Food is a great medium for cultural sharing," he says.

At every level of the U.S. food chain, halal foods occupy a small but rapidly expanding niche. Sales in grocery and convenience stores and similar outlets reached \$1.9 billion in the 12 months through August, a 15 percent increase from 2012, according to Nielsen research. Total halal sales are projected to reach \$20 billion this year, a third more than in 2010, according to the

Islamic Food and Nutrition Council of America, an industry group.

Whole Foods Market, which started selling halal food in 2010, promotes the items during such holidays as Ramadan, the monthlong period of fasting and prayer. It has seen double-digit sales growth of halal in each of the last five years, according to Rick Findlay, vice president for purchasing and marketing. "People look to Whole Foods to be that trendsetter," he says, noting that halal entrees from Saffron Road are among the company's best-selling frozen products. The brand is made by food company **American Halal**, founded in 2010, and is sold in 12,000 stores, including Whole Foods, **Kroger**, **Safeway**, and **Giant Foods**.

"Halal really resonates to a much larger umbrella than just Muslims," says Adnan Durrani, the founder and chief executive officer of American Halal. He estimates that as many as 80 percent of Saffron Road consumers are food lovers who don't follow Islamic law. The proportion of Americans who do is growing—the number of U.S. Muslims is projected to reach 8.1 million by 2050, up from 3.3 million in 2015.

Some of the biggest food companies and grocery chains aren't as committed to the U.S. market for halal. **Mondelēz International**, which operates in predominantly Muslim countries such as Indonesia and Saudi Arabia, where halal is standard, sells only a handful of such products in the U.S. **Nestlé**, the world's largest food company, has 151 factories around the world, from Malaysia to Pakistan, making hundreds of halal products. In the U.S., the company sells the food mainly through its health-care unit, which supplies hospitals. **Walmart** sells halal products in 400 of its 4,600 stores.

At a time when Islam has stoked political debate, the cuisine could carry a stigma, says Krishnendu Ray, associate professor of food studies at New York University. But based on Americans' history with ethnic food, halal "could eventually be like kosher food, which is identified as fresher, more virtuous," says Ray, who has studied and written about immigrant influences on American cuisine. A parallel to halal is Americans' perception of German food during the first and second World Wars. Sauerkraut was renamed liberty cabbage, and the

hamburger, an American staple today, was suspect, he says.

The King of Prussia Halal Guys is one of six to open across the U.S. in recent weeks. The company, which established its first franchise in 2015, plans 300 sit-down locations over the next three years, far from the busy New York street corner where it started. It's popular because it tastes good, Mohiuddin says, and "people care about how their food is prepared." —*Jeff Green and Craig Giammona, with Leslie Patton and Corinne Gretler*

The bottom line Sales of halal food in grocery and convenience stores in the U.S. have increased 15 percent since 2012.

Halal Time

