

Arab-America's Store

Wal-Mart stocks falafel, olives and Islamic greeting cards to attract Dearborn's ethnic shoppers.

By KEITH NAUGHTON

AS ARWA HAMAD STROLLS A new Wal-Mart, an eight-foot display of olive oil stops her in her tracks. "Oh, wow," she says, marveling at the sight of so many gallons of Lebanese extra virgin. "We could go through one of these in a week in my house." Around the corner, row upon row of gallon jars of olives—from Turkey, Greece, Egypt and Lebanon—soak in deep hues of purple, red and green. "Look at the size of these olives," says the stay-at-home mother of three and native of Yemen. Hamad, 34, has shopped at Wal-Mart before, but never one like this. She is overcome with nostalgia as she spots Nido powdered milk and Al Haloub Cow, canned meat she calls the "Arabic Spam." "My father loves this," she says. "People from war-torn countries, this is what you lived on when you couldn't get out of the house to shop." This Wal-Mart, though, isn't in a war zone. It's in Dearborn, Mich., home to nearly a half-million Arab-Americans, the largest concentration of Arabs outside the Middle East.

As America changes, so does the store where America shops. In Dearborn this week, the world's largest retailer opens a store like no other among its 3,500 U.S. outlets. Walk through the front door of the 200,000-square-foot supercenter and instead of rows of checkout counters, you find a scene akin to a farmers market in Beirut. Twenty-two tables are stacked high with fresh produce like *kusa* and *batenjan*, squash and eggplant used in Middle Eastern dishes. Rimming the produce department are shelves filled with Arab favorites like mango juice from Egypt and vine leaves from Turkey used to make *mehshi*, or stuffed grape leaves. A walled-off section of the butcher case is devoted to Halal meats, slaughtered in accordance with Islamic law (when a Wal-Mart manager noticed the pork section was too prominent he ordered it moved, since Muslims don't eat pork). In the freezer case, you'll find frozen falafel. You can also pick up a CD from Lebanese pop singer Ragheb Alama or buy Muslim greeting cards.

Wal-Mart's Arab-American emporium provides a preview of the retail giant's latest strategy to boost business as it reaches



BIG BAZAAR: Arabic-speaking staff can guide customers to the Middle Eastern goods

the saturation point in its American expansion. Over the past two years, Wal-Mart has tested its "store of the community": it has stocked stores in Chicago and Atlanta with products aimed at African-Americans and set up a hitching post at an Ohio store near a large Amish community. The Dearborn store, though, is the most extreme example of the concept. Wal-Mart offers its standard fare, plus 550 items targeted at Middle Eastern shoppers. "In the past, Wal-Mart has been pretty cookie-cutter when it comes to merchandise," says

Dearborn store manager Bill Bartell. "But this time, we really got to know the community. We're blazing a trail here."

Typically when Wal-Mart comes to town, it drops its big-box store on the community with a thud. Then it rolls out rock-bottom prices that undercut local merchants, who often wither and die. That Bigfooting has led to passionate community opposition in many markets, including suburban Detroit, where it opened its first supercenter just a year ago to protests over plans to stay open 24 hours (Wal-Mart backed down to 18 hours a day).

To fit into this bastion of ethnic tradition, Wal-Mart started two years ago to meet with imams and moms, conducting focus groups at Middle Eastern restaurants. Wal-Mart learned the community wasn't as concerned about seeing Arabic-language signs as they were with dealing with Arabic-speaking staff. So Bartell hired about 35 Arabic speakers, including Suehaia Amen, a local middle-school teacher who is providing ethnic-sensitivity training to the 650 employees. He also learned not to bother stocking traditional Muslim clothing, like the headscarf, or *hijab*, Amen wears. "The community told us, 'I would not feel comfortable coming to Wal-Mart to buy my hijab,'" says assistant store manager Jordan Berke. "We're not here to overstep our bounds."

Despite the sensitive sell, local shopkeepers still worry about Wal-Mart. "There is a fear factor in the business community," says Osama Sibiani, publisher of Dearborn's Arab American News. To allay those fears, Wal-Mart is making an extraordinary promise: it will not undercut the prices of the small local merchants (though it will still go after Kroger). The insular company even agreed to be scrutinized by a "community advisory board" made up of local Arab-American leaders to ensure it isn't harming the mom-and-pop shops. One example: Wal-Mart agreed to charge one dime more than local grocers for a six-pack of pita bread.

Arwa Hamad says her devotion to Dearborn's Muslim merchants doesn't simply rest on one thin dime. After all, when her husband goes to their Arab butcher, he buys in bulk. "It's hard to get half a lamb at Wal-Mart," she says. And yet, the more she wanders the aisles, the more she likes. There are the Turkish sweets and dried dates her kids love, and the Nescafé coffee she adores. "This brings back memories from home," she says. "I'll never forget Mustafa's corner store, but as soon as this place opens, I'm coming here with my checkbook." Going native just might be the next way Wal-Mart wins. ■