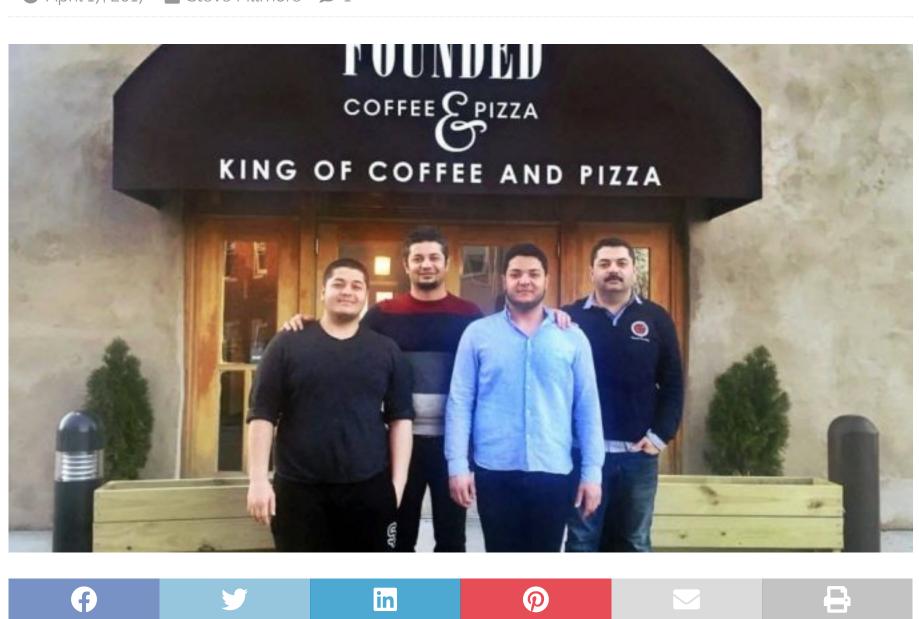


## Well Founded

HOME > BUSINESSES AND ORGANIZATIONS > Well Founded

🕓 April 17, 2017 💄 Steve Fillmore 🎾 1



Founded Coffee and Pizza is more than an innovative new business, it's a classic immigrant success story.

Fahri Demirpence, owner of Founded Coffee and Pizza on Henry Ave., didn't always dream of coming to America. But when he was growing up in the village of Atmanek in Turkey (near Suruc and the Syrian border), the constant threat of violence convinced him early on that life had to be better elsewhere.

"I was 5 or 6 and I can still remember the bullets, the red tracers, flying overhead. My brothers and I could see them from our bedroom...."



Conflict in Turkish- Syrian border town

"...They were like fireworks. They were kind of exciting to me because I was a kid, still I knew I had to find a place where people didn't hate or wanted to do violence to me or my family. You get tired of living hard. Because we are Kurds, not Turks, there were always problems for our people in Turkey. It started this search for me."

The search for a better life has, so far, gotten him to America, launched two pizza businesses, and helped his brothers escape Turkey (and establish businesses of their own in the U.S.), while also employing dozens of people in East Falls and center city.

It's a story Fahri tells without any hint of arrogance. For him there's been more than a little divine intervention at work. *"I am very spiritual person and I believe things work out for a reason."* Even his decision to emigrate to America came as the result of *"a sign from above"* while he working as a waiter at a resort on Cyprus in the eastern Mediterranean.



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There was a couple vacationing there, the husband was from Turkey and his wife was American. "*I was still a kid – maybe 18 or 19. They were both so nice to me. They asked me what I wanted to do. I told them I was studying restaurant management and wanted to go someplace to learn English and use what I learned at school,*" Fahri told us.

"They said you should go to America. That's the best place to get started. The man's wife in particular treated me with so much respect, she really listened. I didn't really have a good idea of what America was then, but she made me think there were more good people like her there and that's what I wanted above all."

So that's how Fahri found himself in a JFK airport terminal in 2007 as a refugee with no knowledge of English, little money, no one to meet him at the airport, and a single phone number in his pocket from a man in a neighboring Turkish village who had emigrated to the U.S. many years earlier. (Fahri's father had found the number and given it to him.)



GETTY IMAGES NORTH AMERICA/AFP/File

"The police were asking me who I knew and were telling me I might be deported but I got lucky. I found a Turkish couple in the terminal and asked them to call this number for me." It took lots of convincing (the man's first question was "Are you crazy?") but 5 hours later Fahri got the ride that began his journey in America.

Months of waiting tables, cooking, construction work, and other gigs followed for Fahri in New York and New Jersey as he tried to find permanent work. Despite the setbacks he always found a reason to keep at it.

"When I was trying to get my first job in New York, a friend from Turkey told me about a Turkish restaurant in the lower east side of Manhattan. It was almost 30 blocks away, so I walked there, because I didn't know how to take the subway. I didn't get the job and I was so depressed but as I was walking home I saw a man walking past me with an oxygen tank, he could barely walk, could barely breathe but wasn't going to let that stop him. I decided that if he can fight like that then I wouldn't give up either. Never."

He finally got a break, a job pumping gas at a station in New Jersey that was quickly followed by a better gig at a restaurant in upstate New York where he became a chef. It was there he got the idea of going into business for himself. Searching online for restaurants he found a gyro shop in suburban station in Philadelphia that he wanted to make into a pizza place.



The only problem? He knew nothing about making pizza. Enter a friend of his from New York city, Hakki Akdeniz, a world (and American) pizza champion — check him out in these videos!– who had also come from Turkey and spent years on the streets of Manhattan's lower east side before opening multiple pizza shops.



Akdeniz offered to teach Fahri everything he knew about pizza from creating and spinning the dough (Akdeniz has won prizes for his acrobatic pizza spinning skills, sometimes performing blindfolded and in handcuffs with the pizza dough on fire) to making the thin crust that is the hallmark of New York pizza. "*In Philadelphia the crust is much thicker than New York*," says Fahri. "*I prefer it thinner*."



Fahri behind the counter at Yummy Pizza (Suburban Station)

For three months (while the suburban station location was being converted into the Yummy Pizza shop), Fahri studied with Akdeniz. "Long hours. Every day and every night just working on making everything right, the sauce, the dough. Hakki is very giving of his expertise. He's had hard times and he always wants to give back to people. He even teaches kids sometimes for free so they have a skill."

That lesson sticks with Fahri, giving back. It's the thing he's most proud of, helping the people he works with, whether it's giving a college student a job or helping one of his workers bring a family member to America. "*One of my cooks, from Algeria will be able to bring his wife here. That makes me happy.*" It's a sentiment Fahri repeats often – he wants to make people happy.

That means there's a lot he's had to sacrifice. "*My people back in Turkey, they seem farther and farther away all the time. And I worry sometimes I'll never see them again. It's been nine years since I've seen any of my relatives from Turkey, except my father. My mother even asked once when she saw a photo of me with my brothers, which one is Fahri?*"



Fortunately he's been able to help his family in other ways, like bringing his three brothers to America and setting up two of them with cellphone businesses in New Jersey malls. "*They are hard workers too, they just needed a chance and as the oldest brother, I wanted to give them that.*"



And he still found the time to take over the Gatehouse building at Falls Center (which housed Chestnut Hill Coffee) and expand the space himself to include his pizza operation (did we mention he has construction skills too?) Andrew Eisenstein and Jason Friedland, of Iron Stone Strategic Capital Partners and owners of the building, are friends of Fahri's and pitched him on the idea.

Fahri didn't hesitate and hasn't stopped coming up with new ideas for the building ever since, including plans to renovate the upstairs to include a bar amid a lounge/special events area and an ambitious plan for an outdoor grill where the patio is now.



Grapevine trellis concept.

"It'll be a granite grill with a grapevine trellis over it (with Persian grapes) and a fountain nearby. Lots of nice tables, couches, and seating – very inviting. We'll have a menu for the grill but we encourage people to bring their own food too if they like and we'll grill it for them. There'll also be an open mic system – we don't mind if people bring guitars and just want to play."

Fahri keeps one eye on this bright future and another on the political situation. "It's hard to stay positive. It affects me with new business too. I've been asked if I want to open another business but how can I when I'm not sure what's going to happen?

"I've heard people saying they want to deport or even put Muslims in camps. What's the point of staying and running a business? I pay thousands of dollars in taxes every month. And I've got many people on my payroll. People that are my friends and who rely on me. What happens to them?"



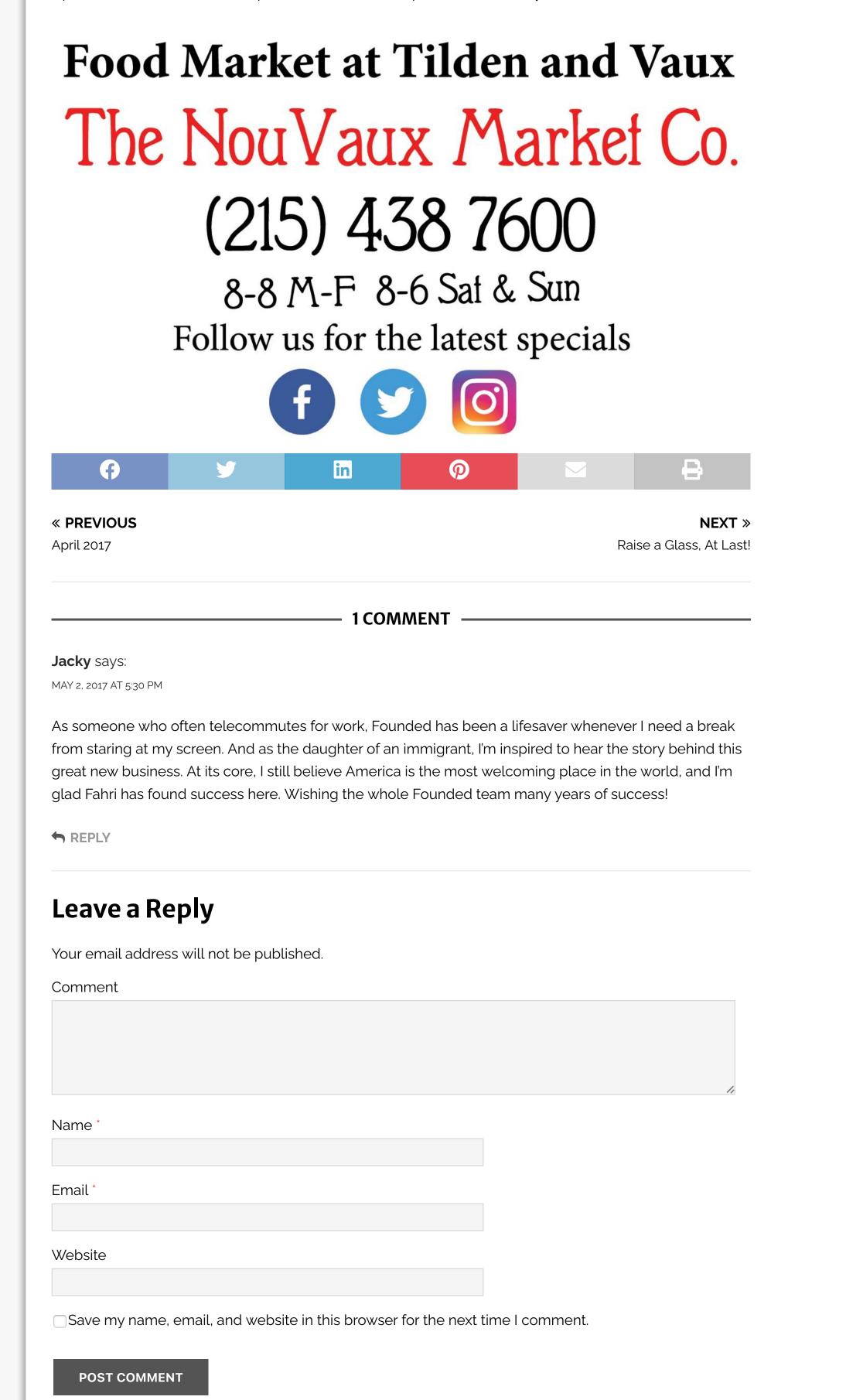
He refuses to let it get him down though. "All I can do is keep working and trying to make people happy. There are so many things to be thankful for here and I've been very blessed. And there's still so much more to give. How can you quit? I won't ever."

FOUNDED Coffee & Pizza

The old Chestnut Hill Coffee at Falls Center now offers extended hours plus... PIZZA! Really good, thin-crust pizza.

## PIZZA NINJA REVIEW PIZZA TRIPPIN' (Detroit-Style) 3300 Henry Avenue 267-214-1088

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