

# The Sweet Dates a Couple Makes

## Mid-East Sweets

*A Filipino couple who had a sweet time in the Middle East for years decided to look for greener pastures and fruitfully found it in the Philippines.*



**THE FRUIT OF HARD WORK IN BAHRAIN**  
Samuel and Cheryl Arquero have successfully set up a business in Nueva Vizcaya. Mid-East Sweets specialties include pies, tarts, and chocolates—all with dates.

**S**amuel Arquero was in Bahrain's academic and shipbuilding industry for around eight years when wife Cheryl joined him over the next four.

During that period, though, Bahrain's economy remained flat, making Samuel urge his then-pregnant wife to start a business after giving birth.

"We thought of having a business as a fallback," Samuel says in Filipino.

But with no specific business in mind, the couple's attention was drawn to dates, the sweet oval-shaped fruits that the Middle East is known for. Thus, they named their business Mid-East Sweets.

However, not everyone in the Philippines can afford it.

"So, I did some research and learned of its local availability, but (these were) very expensive. [It] prompted us to look for affordable varieties," Samuel narrates.

After a series of research and experimentation, the couple found two with the same health benefits and used them in 2013 for Mid-East Sweets' first product—Dates with Almond Coated with Dark Chocolate.

Cheryl established Mid-East Sweets in the Philippines while Samuel was still in Bahrain. They put up a store in Bagabag, Nueva Vizcaya and registered the business with the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI) in 2014.

Largely elevated, Nueva Vizcaya is an emerging destination for foreign and domestic tourists, to whom the Mid-East Sweets products constitute a great take-home present.

In 2014, the product line grew in number from one to six—Dates with Almond Coated with Dark Chocolate, Dates with Honey and Pistachio, Dates with Sesame and Honey, Dates Bar with Mixed Nuts, Dates Bar with Cashew and Coconut, and Dates Tarts.



**DID YOU KNOW?**  
Date trees require up to 60,000 gallons of water each year but they cannot tolerate rain or humidity. They can only have water in their roots.





Product development continued. They made buko, pineapple, mango, and ube pies with dates as natural sweetener.

But aside from capital and operating expenditures, the business also entailed compliance with regulatory and export requirements, including those imposed by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and Islamic Da'wah Council of the Philippines (IDCP), a duly recognized Halal Certification and Accreditation Authority in the Philippines.

Assistance came, courtesy of the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI) and the Department of Science and Technology (DOST). DTI helped the Arqueros in marketing and promotion, including guidance in sourcing financial assistance, while the DOST provided the production equipment.

"DTI's marketing assistance took us to many places for our product exhibits," Samuel gushes.

The former 6-square-meter shop doubled in size, enabling the Arqueros to produce their own mango purees and rice crispies, rebrand their products, and pass the nutrition verification process of the FDA. Their products are now just a few steps from becoming available in Robinsons malls.

Above all, the Mid-East Sweets got Halal certified, making it eligible for export to Muslim countries. With the certification, the Arqueros are now excited about the prospect of having their dates and other products enjoyed by Filipino expatriates all over the world, especially Bahrain and the rest of the Middle East.

On his entrepreneurial journey, Samuel says, "Don't get bogged down by destructive and negative influences. Just focus on your goal and keep moving."

Now, Malaysia is eyed as the next target of the dates sweets the couple makes.



(Top right) Mid-East Sweets is not all about sweetness. It got the nutrition verification from the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and the Halal certification from the Islamic Da'wah Council of the Philippines (IDCP). (Bottom) To expand their market reach in the Visayas, they are saving a peso from every unit's sale for the ube farmers to increase and sustain yam production.



**THE PROCESS OF PIE AND TART MAKING**  
Making the filling, laying the crust intricately, cooking at the right amount of heat, and cooling in a proper environment are the basic steps in making the delectable pies.

### Making chocolate-coated dates with almonds

- 1** Classify the dates and remove the seeds.
- 2** Pre-heat the dates to 80 degrees celcius for 15 minutes.
- 3** Peel the skin, stuff with almonds and coat with melted chocolata.
- 4** Refrigerate for 15 minutes.

### HOW DTI HELPED

The couple, Samuel and Cheryl, were able to get trainings in marketing and promotion, assistance in acquiring food certifications, and guidance in sourcing financial assistance, through DTI's **Shared Service Facilities (SSF)** project.

Mid-East Sweets also participated in the DTI-sponsored **Silang Pinoy** fair that gave them better brand presence.