And so Durrani, chief executive officer of American Halal/Saffron Road Foods and president of Condor Ventures Inc., became a pioneer in the natural food business. “I loved the idea that, as a socially responsible food entrepreneur,” he says, “I could feel and touch what I innovated. Plus, building sustainable enterprises is a lot more gratifying!”

The idea for Saffron Road Foods was born out of Durrani’s desire, after the tragedy of 9/11, to create a social enterprise that would bring together different cultures, faiths, and politics. “Saffron Road’s mission is to restore the spiritual sacredness to food and celebrate commonality of all cultures. It’s been a huge success—the number one new product nationally in Whole Foods Market, the $10 billion organic retailer,” says Durrani.

Born in Pakistan, Durrani grew up in Maryland. His mother was a diplomat in Washington, D.C., and his father worked for the World Bank. Both Columbia, where he earned his BS in electrical engineering with a minor in economics, and New York City were a huge draw. He credits Columbia with broadening his cultural and social edification, since the majority of classmates were not in engineering but in economics and liberal arts.

“The faculty and student body were game changers for me. Whether on the debate team or in class, I constantly felt intellectually challenged in such a positive and enlightening way. I couldn’t have succeeded without the quantitative discipline and worldly view Columbia gave me, especially the importance of social responsibility to both my community and the world,” says Durrani. “My transition from engineering to business at Columbia was really an organic evolution.” He found electrical engineering great training for a career in business, giving him the fundamentals to think broadly.

After graduation from Columbia, Durrani went to Lehman Brothers, where he got a “front-row seat” on how American entrepreneurship works. “I was lucky to witness enormous tech innovation and enlightened by how our whole system caters to the entrepreneur,” he says.

In 1989, he founded Vermont Pure/Crystal Rock Water Co., the second largest bottled water company in the northeast. He was the principal financial partner of Stonyfield Farms, the leading organic yogurt brand, spearheading its private sale to Danone in 2003. He was also a principal of Delicious Brands Inc., whose growth he led, with the financial backing of Carl Icahn, to become the fifth largest cookie brand in the United States.

Reflecting on his education at Columbia Engineering, Durrani, who serves on Columbia Engineering’s Board of Visitors and is chairman of the School’s Entrepreneurship Advisory Board, exclaims that, “Engineering rocks! It’s the only undergrad major that’s embodied by an unmatched work ethic, a deeply steeped quantitative discipline, a real-life approach to solving big problems, and an elegant methodology of how to take complex problems and make them simple in a challenging world.”

An Organic Evolution

ADNAN DURRANI BS’81

The stock market crash of 1987 marked Adnan Durrani’s turning point. “I had my head handed to me,” he says. “I got professionally burned by tech stocks and began to realize that, for me, Wall Street’s ethos of immediate gratification was toxic and unfulfilling. I was driven to social capitalism—generating profits while holistically contributing back to society and positively impacting humanity.”