



## Mind Her Business



She's kicking back with a brew.

**Sahra Nguyen** is the founder of **Nguyen Coffee Supply**, which aims to bring more knowledge, sustainability, and integrity to the "Vietnamese coffee" popping up in cafes around the country. (Spoiler alert: It's probably not real Vietnamese coffee, at least not yet.)

Here's how Sahra went from the documentary film world to the coffee scene, why she thinks about food the way she thinks about fashion, and what price you should expect for a more ethical latte.

### Were you that kid who always drank coffee, even when you were little?

I always loved the smell. That was the first thing that got me. I grew up in Boston, so when my parents weren't grinding their own coffee, they were picking it up from Dunkin' and I loved the smell... Then as an adult, when I would travel, one of my favorite things to do was to explore the local coffee shop scene. Every café has its own personality. It's a place for community where people come together. Even in New York, when I was freelancing, I would work mostly from coffee shops, because my apartment was so small! And whether it was meetings or hangouts or first dates even, connecting with people always happened for me over coffee! But I never saw myself as a coffee entrepreneur. I would never be like, "Just you wait, one day, I'm going to be a roaster."

### What was the catalyst for starting your business?

In 2016, I saw the rise of matcha. It's the fastest-growing tea brand in the category. There are specialty shops devoted to it. And there are many places where matcha is made with real respect and care for its heritage, right? But listen, I am Vietnamese-American, and when I would walk into a coffee shop and they had "Vietnamese Iced Coffee" on the menu, it tasted nothing like the Vietnamese coffee I grew up with... And did you know, Vietnam is the second-biggest coffee producer in the world?

### What were people claiming was "Vietnamese coffee?"

A lot of cafes would say, "Oh, the coffee in this is our house blend from Ethiopia." And I'm like, "Why would you render the actual farmers invisible? Call it Ethiopian coffee! Give them the spotlight! And then go find actual Vietnamese coffee, too!" It was crazy to me that these cafes were profiting off the cultural cachet of Vietnamese coffee, but the Vietnamese community wasn't benefiting from that transaction, and the Ethiopian community was being ignored. It was so messed up, and covered so many levels of cultural erasure and economic injustice. So that's when I thought, "Okay, fine, what if I import my own beans? What if I roast them in Brooklyn myself? What if I show people what Vietnamese coffee can be?"

### How do you turn that passion into a small business?

First, I did tons of research and went to Vietnam. Because of my background in documentary film, I'm kind of a warrior about research. I get into every little corner of the subject. Next, I set up direct trade relationships and partnerships with all our farmers... I go through the entire harvesting process with them. It had to be done the right way... When I came back, because I come from an artistic background, and I know the whole Adobe Suite because of my work, I had designed all of our logos and packaging while waiting for my first shipment of coffee to arrive... And then it did. That's when I was like, "Well sh\*t, I have a giant bag of coffee in my apartment now. I better do something about it." *[Laughing.]*

### We drink coffee every day. What do we not know about our coffee?

It takes so much to get coffee from the plant into the cup you're drinking. So much... I even did a whole photo essay about it on our website. 1 cup of coffee involves so many lives around the globe. The supply chain is basically invisible, and because of that, it leads to a lot of exploitation, both of people and the environment. It's part of my job to stop that. I would love you to know how much care and love and labor goes into producing the coffee we all enjoy... And now, I get really stressed out when I see cheap cups of coffee, because to me, they imply labor exploitation.

### How much should a bag of coffee cost?

Listen, I know we're all trying to budget. I know many people can't pay \$36 for a bag of coffee. But I would say, if you're paying less than \$14, you should think about where that coffee is coming from.

### Has the climate crisis changed your job at all?

Of course! But one of the things that we're excited about is how coffee farming can be the foundation for sustainable farming policies around the globe. If you're on the ground working with farmers and listening to their expertise about the beans used and the soil they need, it sets up a better supply chain for the consumer and the ecosystem. And since 125 million people make their livelihood on coffee, creating a safe and sustainable standard for coffee production also protects those people.

### How much coffee is too much coffee to drink in 1 day?

That's not a thing. Drink all the coffee!

