



## Percolating Interest

Sahra Nguyen brews up a booming Vietnamese coffee business

By Eric Newill • Illustration by Lucie Birant

The barista at the café spilled the beans: The main ingredient in the so-called Vietnamese iced coffee had been sourced from Colombia. And off Sahra Nguyen set, to make a change. In 2018, she founded Nguyen Coffee Supply to bring attention to beans produced in Vietnam, the world’s second-largest supplier, after Brazil.

While a career in coffee was new to her, the impetus to start the company was familiar: The 35-year-old entrepreneur has been driven since childhood by a sense of cultural invisibility. “Being a first-generation Vietnamese American,” she says, “the biggest thing growing up was a lack of representation of people who looked like me on television and in movies and magazines.” The Boston native and UCLA grad made her initial mark as a filmmaker, with a focus on increasing the profile of her community. Working for NBC News, she created *Self-Starters*, a program that profiled Asian-American entrepreneurs, and the award-winning *Deported*, a documentary about Cambodian refugees who had been unwillingly repatriated by the U.S. government.

Now, she’s bringing the same passion to Nguyen Coffee Supply, which has caught on quickly. Fans include Mindy Kaling and Drew Barrymore—who hosted Nguyen on her talk show—and this summer Nguyen graced the cover of *Food & Wine*’s “Game Changers” issue. “We’re not just creating a vibrant market

for coffee,” she says, “but really changing the narrative.”

**On the genesis of her company:** “I noticed that mainstream cafés started expressing an interest in Vietnamese coffee, but every time I ordered it, it would not taste like Vietnamese coffee. I thought, OK, there’s an interest here, but they’re not engaging with the cultural product in an appropriate way. Then I discovered that Vietnam is the second-largest producer of coffee in the world, which blew my mind. Being a Vietnamese person, I thought, Why don’t I know this? And why don’t more people know about Vietnam’s contribution to the global coffee experience? That inspired me to bring visibility to Vietnam as a major coffee contributor to the world. Both of my parents come from large families, and they were the only ones to escape after the war. I’m close to my family network in Vietnam, and when I was thinking about starting this company I said, ‘I want to import Vietnamese coffee. Does anyone know anyone with a farm?’ My aunt was like, ‘Actually, I do,’ so we took a plane from Hanoi to Da Lat, where we met my current producing partner.”

**On contemporary coffee culture:** “Consumers’ appreciation for coffee is moving toward a cultural experience rather than seeing coffee as divorced from the source. So much of the specialty

third-wave coffee culture was rooted in science and sustainability, which is wonderful, and we believe the fourth wave will be rooted in culture and humanity. People are prioritizing transparency a lot more: They want to know where anything they’re supporting is coming from, because when there’s a lack of transparency, often there’s exploitation at the end of the supply chain.”

**On being an Asian-American female entrepreneur:** “My generation is coming of age, and we’re entering these spaces of influence—whether in a corporate environment or government or entrepreneurship—where we’re able to define culture. We’re creating an ecosystem that is affirming. To see women own their world is inspiring, and it’s also shaping society. The more women there are, the more diverse perspectives we’re able to create. We can inspire people toward a reality that we can all live in together.”

**On what’s next:** “Our goal is to become the world’s largest global coffee brand. Think of Lavazza or Illy—global distribution, expanding on our bean filters and brew methods. We’d also love to create a full Vietnamese coffee experience through cafés. Maybe in a few years we’ll think about producing a documentary about building this empire.” [nguyencoffeesupply.com](http://nguyencoffeesupply.com)