

How a former freelance journalist emptied her savings and put \$20,000 on her credit card to turn a Vietnamese-coffee side hustle into a full-time business

Britney Nguyen



Sahra Nguyen, the founder and CEO of Nguyen Coffee Supply. Erics Kun/Nguyen Coffee Supply

Sahra Nguyen was a freelance journalist when she started building Nguyen Coffee Supply in 2016.

She saw an injustice in US coffee culture because Vietnamese coffee was missing from the market.

Even after leaving journalism, Nguyen said she was still telling stories about her community.

When Sahra Nguyen noticed in 2016 that her local coffee shops in Brooklyn, New York, were selling Vietnamese iced coffee, also known as cà phê sữa đá, without using Vietnamese coffee beans, she saw an injustice she wanted to fix.

Rather than using Vietnamese arabica coffee beans, or the darker and bolder robusta beans, which make up 95% of Vietnam's coffee output, many shops were using Colombian or Ethiopian coffee beans, the kind found in your typical American coffee house. Nguyen, then a freelance journalist, couldn't sit idly by. So she decided to bring Vietnamese coffee to the US herself.

In November 2018, Nguyen founded Nguyen Coffee Supply, a direct-to-consumer coffee company that imports coffee beans from Da Lat, Vietnam, and roasts them in Brooklyn. Her entrepreneurial journey began somewhat by accident, and she joins thousands of other Americans who have turned passion projects into full-time pursuits, especially during the pandemic.

According to the human-resources platform Gusto, almost half the businesses started in 2020 were owned by women of color.

"I really wanted to start this company to bring visibility to Vietnamese coffee and increase transparency," Nguyen, the 35-year-old CEO of her company, said. (Nguyen Coffee Supply declined to share revenue figures with Insider.)

Through her business, Nguyen said she's been able to tell stories about the Asian American community and increase its representation and diversity — something she

was already doing as a journalist, but now in a different form. She's managed to replicate the sense of purpose from full-time work in her self-employment.

"I definitely see a change happening, which is really exciting," Nguyen said of her company's influence on coffee culture. "We still have a long way to go, but I feel like we're starting to change a lot of minds."

From journalist to business owner

Nguyen started her career as a freelance journalist with a desire to tell stories about the Asian American community. She did documentary work for outlets like Vice and NBC News, which helped her reckon with her "feeling of invisibility growing up," she said. The platforms gave her a way to "increase visibility and amplify stories from my community, while also being creative," she added.

But while she said her films influenced the Asian American community, her financial security as a freelancer in New York City failed to improve. Nguyen said she never managed to escape living paycheck to paycheck.

Enter: her view of injustice behind the coffee counter.

Despite Vietnam being the second-largest coffee producer in the world, its robusta beans are generally regarded as lower quality than arabica beans, Nguyen said. She said that narrative "traps Vietnamese people, producers, and communities in economic exploitation because they don't have an opportunity to elevate their products."

While she was freelancing, Nguyen began early work on Nguyen Coffee Supply, realizing coffee was another way to create greater representation for the Asian American community, specifically Vietnam.

"I grew up really with no representation," Nguyen said. "I didn't have YouTube or Instagram to feel connected to other people who look like me."

She said the experience made her feel invisible and small.

While on assignment in Cambodia, Nguyen visited her family in Vietnam and floated the idea of the business.

"My aunt was like, 'Oh, I know someone. He's a good friend,'" Nguyen said. Her family connection helped forge a partnership with whom she called Mr. Ton, a fourth-generation farmer from Vietnam's Central Highlands who still works with Nguyen to import beans to the US.

Supporting herself with freelance work, Nguyen worked both jobs for a year and a half before Nguyen Coffee Supply had grown enough to make her consider going all in on her business.

"I had to make a decision of which I was going to commit to," Nguyen said. "I decided to commit to building the business because I had a lot of excitement over the possibilities of an impact we could make through Nguyen Coffee Supply."



Creating change through storytelling

For the first six months, Nguyen said all she knew about starting the business was what was in her immediate future.

She turned to Google and her friends to figure out the finances for the business and how to import and roast coffee beans. Her double major in Asian American studies and world arts and cultures from the University of California, Los Angeles, helped her with designing the brand and producing videos and photos to promote her business.

With little money and no investors, Nguyen withdrew her savings and used her credit card to buy \$20,000 worth of inventory and other supplies. Today, Nguyen Coffee Supply carries three blends of coffee: an arabica blend, a robusta and arabica blend, and a robusta blend, all directly imported from Vietnam.

"I think being comfortable with not having a master plan figured out, just starting and making some progress, then evaluating what you need to do to continue making progress was how I approached it," Nguyen said.

Watching her parents go through the American system as refugees with no knowledge of the English language and US culture was a big inspiration for Nguyen. As she got older, her parents told her about what they went through during and after the Vietnam War, and she felt it was part of her DNA.

"Their resilience, strength, and conviction is something that for sure has influenced me in everything I do today," she said.

Starting Nguyen Coffee Supply wasn't just about sharing a love for coffee, she added. "It was about righting an injustice that I saw was happening in coffee and with Vietnamese people." When people try to profit off Vietnamese iced coffee without using Vietnamese coffee beans, the producers and people in Vietnam don't benefit from that, she said.

With Nguyen Coffee Supply, Nguyen said she hoped to spread the word about Vietnamese coffee and, in the process, "elevate the culture and community and products." And while she started the company with little certainty on how it was going to work out, she said taking the first step was the best decision she made.

"Be OK with not having all the answers, and be OK with not having the whole master plan," she said. "Take that first step to getting closer, then figure out that next step once you're there."