Jo Turner
Alumni

7 Columbia Coffee Entrepreneurs You Should Know

Alumni-owned coffee shops and roasters are energizing communities through cold brew, cappuccinos, cortados, and more.

By
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|
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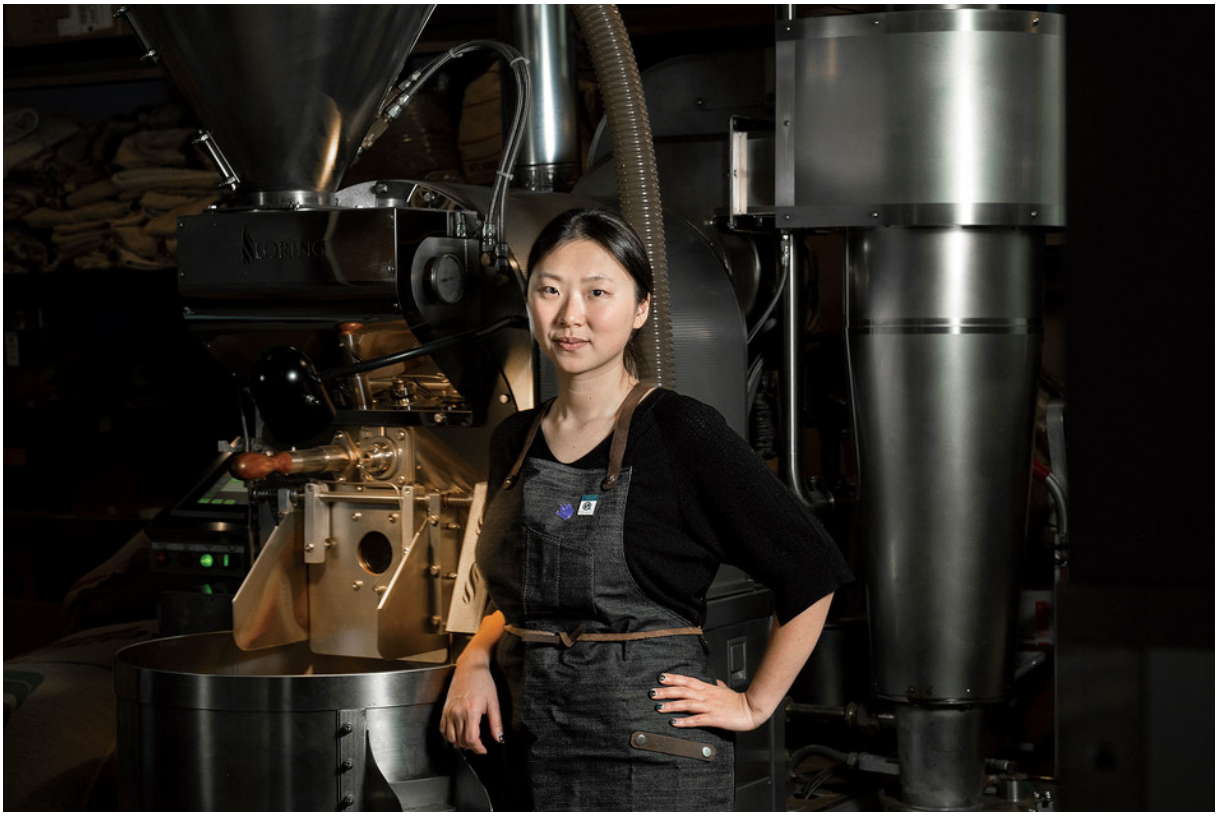
Jo Turner

Bean & Bean

As a high-school student growing up in Queens, Jiyoon Han ’13CC would spend weekends working as a barista at Bean & Bean, the coffee shop owned by her parents in New York City’s Financial District. “I learned to perfect the craft of making coffee,” says Han, who was born in Seoul and moved to the United States at age nine.

Sixteen years after the coffee shop’s 2008 opening, Han, a former Columbia economics and philosophy major with an MBA from Harvard, is applying her business acumen as the co-owner of Bean & Bean. Working with her mother, Rachel, Han has helped oversee the company’s four brick-and-mortar locations, an expansion of the Queens roastery, and the launch of an online business. She’s also spearheaded the development of new business partnerships with schools such as Barnard and the Manhattan School of Music and corporations such as Meta and Goldman Sachs, which serve Bean & Bean’s coffee in their cafés and pantries.



Jiyoon Han (Diane Sooyeon Kang)

The company, which prioritizes ethical sourcing, makes a point to buy most of its beans from female farmers. “When my mom and I started going on coffee trips together, we realized that women make up more than half of the labor force but a small minority of farm owners,” explains Han. “The value distribution is not proportionate.” The mother-daughter duo frequently visits Central and South America to meet coffee growers on their farms. “Over the years, I see how our purchasing directly leads to community improvement,” says Han. “Mothers are able to buy computers for their children and build soccer fields for them to play on.”

As an arabica Q grader (“like a coffee sommelier”), Han is acutely tuned in to flavor, aroma, acidity, and aftertaste. “A good coffee, when it cools down, tends to shine even more,” she says. As an entrepreneur, she is driven by the ways the beverage’s demand can fuel economic empowerment and environmental sustainability. Because coffee trees provide habitats for sloths, Bean & Bean uses the jungle creature on its packaging and donates 1 percent of online proceeds to the Sloth Institute, a conservation nonprofit in Costa Rica.

“I care about who the coffee producers are, if the beans are grown on rainforest-protected farms, and if the farm owners are giving back to their communities,” says

Han. “What I love most about coffee are the stories I’m able to tell through this beverage that millions of people drink every day.”

Sip & Sonder in Inglewood, California.

Sip & Sonder

For a legal consultant with degrees in law, business, and engineering, choosing to open a coffee shop might sound like a surprising career move. But Shanita Nicholas ’09SEAS, ’13LAW, ’13BUS, a triple Columbia alumna with years of experience in the financial industry, chose to do just that when she cofounded Sip & Sonder, a specialty roaster and coffee brand in Los Angeles.

“I always thought, when I retire I’ll open a little coffee shop,” says Nicholas. The opportunity came sooner than expected once she befriended Amanda-Jane Thomas, a fellow attorney with a combined passion for coffee and community empowerment. In 2017, they opened Sip & Sonder in Inglewood, a city in the Los Angeles metro area. “Through coffee, I actually get to do a lot of the things I studied,” says Nicholas, a certified arabica Q grader. “I use my engineering background when

looking at thermodynamics in the roastery and my legal background when dealing with placements and partnerships.”

With a motto of “come for the coffee, stay for the culture,” Sip & Sonder serves high-end brews and at its flagship location hosts an eclectic array of events, including tastings, jazz performances, open-mic nights, and voter-registration drives. Acknowledging coffee’s origin and impact is an integral part of the brand. “Most coffee producers come from communities of color around the world,” says Nicholas, who makes an effort to visit Sip & Sonder’s growers, whether in East Africa, the Caribbean, or Central America. “We home in on telling the story of where coffee comes from and the hands involved in growing, harvesting, and getting it to clients.”

Shanita Nicholas

Outside of Inglewood, Sip & Sonder operates an outpost in Downtown Los Angeles and will expand to Disneyland in late 2024. The company also sells coffee through its website, with signature roasts like Native Daughter (Ethiopian, with notes of “black vanilla, strawberry jam, and dark chocolate”) available as whole beans or tea-style “coffee bags” for steeping. “Since most people consume coffee at home, we want our products to be accessible,” says Nicholas.

Beyond her coffee work, Nicholas still provides legal consulting for startups. She also co-manages a nonprofit supporting Black entrepreneurs called Sonder Impact, which organizes many community-based education and wellness programs at Sip & Sonder. Nicholas believes the coffee shop is the perfect venue to bring people together. “It’s not your house, not your job, but you can go there and sit by yourself or meet people,” she says. “Certainly we hope you buy a coffee when you come in, but there’s no entrance fee or time requirement. A coffee shop is a unique place to experience the world around you.”

Snake River Roasting

When Mekki Jaidi ’10SEAS first visited Jackson Hole, Wyoming, in 2012, he didn’t expect to want to pack up and move his whole life there. “I was instantly hooked,” says the native New Yorker and Columbia Engineering graduate, who at the time was working as a financial trader. “I didn’t realize these beautiful landscapes and vistas existed in the US. I kept finding ways to come back and make a living here.”

Mekki Jaidi (Taylor Glenn)

Today, Jaidi not only lives in Jackson Hole full-time with his family but has established himself as one of the mountain town's most active entrepreneurs. As the founder of Outpost, a vacation-rental company tailored to the outdoor adventurers who visit the valley and nearby Grand Teton and Yellowstone National Parks, Jaidi manages more than 250 properties and runs businesses for cleaning, landscaping, and catering. He serves on the boards of several local nonprofits, and in 2021 he acquired Snake River Roasting, a local coffee company specializing in small-batch roasts.

"We are the only specialty coffee roastery here in Jackson Hole," says Jaidi, who, since buying the business, has revamped its downtown café and focused on expanding the e-commerce arm. (Beans in light, medium, dark, and espresso roasts can be purchased online in single packages or through subscriptions.) "Coffee quality is rated on a scale from zero to one hundred, and anything above eighty is considered specialty," he explains. "We only purchase beans rated eighty or higher."

Jackson Hole’s high altitude — 6,300 feet above sea level — also contributes to Snake River’s rich flavor profiles, says Jaidi. “Because there’s less air pressure up here and the climate is drier, we can roast at lower temperatures. You won’t get an ashy or a burnt flavor but an enhancement of the natural fruitiness and chocolatiness of the beans themselves.”

But it’s the adventurous spirit of Jackson Hole that gives the roastery, which is named after the region’s 1,078-mile-long Snake River, its distinct local charm. “We’re inspired by our surroundings,” says Jaidi, an avid outdoorsman. “We harness the energy that we take from skiing, mountain biking, or being out on the lake and channel it into the coffee. Our hope is that if you’re drinking coffee at home or if you’ve visited Jackson Hole, you can kind of taste the memories created here and propel your next adventure.”

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More alumni coffee companies you should know

Blank Street

Originally started in 2020 as a single coffee cart in Brooklyn, this coffee chain cofounded by Issam Freiha ’17CC now has dozens of shops across New York City; Boston; Washington, DC; and the United Kingdom.

Hidden Grounds

Since opening its first location by the Rutgers campus in 2013, Hidden Grounds, cofounded by Anand Patel ’16BUS, has launched five additional shops in New Jersey and one in Brooklyn.

Le Café

This brand of high-end coffee shops, started in 2013 by Raphael Sakr ’12SPS, can be found all across Manhattan, with outposts at Penn Station, Bryant Park, the United Nations, and other city landmarks.

Wandering Bear

Founded in 2014 by Matt Bachmann ’15BUS and Ben Gordon ’15BUS, Wandering Bear specializes in boxed organic cold brew.

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