

Tasting the future of coffee in Vietnam

Now a key producer, the country's global stature is growing rapidly



Leading Vietnam's coffee renaissance has been Future Coffee Farm founder Toi Nguyen, whose plantation around 180 kilometers from Ho Chi Minh City has become an inspiration to new coffee farmers with grand ambitions of affecting coffee perceptions around the world. (Photo by Mervin Lee)

PAVAN SHAMDASANI, Contributing writer

HO CHI MINH CITY -- There's a high chance you have sampled Vietnam's coffee beans before -- you just may not have realized it.

As the world's second-biggest coffee producer behind Brazil, Vietnamese caffeine regularly energizes large parts of the world, its beans broken down into everything from instant coffee sachets to popular energy drinks.

Over the past few years, as Vietnam's once-marginalized reputation has improved, its global coffee stature has grown rapidly. The rise of such names as Nguyen Coffee Supply in New York, as well as popular Vietnam-tinged cafes across Europe and the U.S., have quickly ushered in a re-evaluation of the country's worth, both for its rich coffee as well as its historic streetside cafe culture.

Back home, with international coffee drinkers still waking up to Vietnam's frothy, sweet, iced coffee beverages -- something even fresher is brewing in Ho Chi Minh City, where local coffee innovators are shaking up long-held traditions about coffee to get all they can out of the humble bean.

Third, fourth, fifth wave -- however specialty coffee historians dub it -- what's taking place in this most cosmopolitan of Vietnam's cities is a renaissance of sorts that may help to reshape the way the world drinks coffee.



Coffee consultant Will Firth's Building Coffee is aimed at Vietnam's growing legion of entrepreneurs, not only helping them start and grow their own coffee businesses, but with everything else including sourcing and roasting, to packaging, quality control and staff training. (Photos by Mervin Lee)

"What's happening globally is different to what's happening [in Vietnam]," said Will Frith, a Vietnam-based coffee consultant. "There, it's an all-inclusive cultural experience, where people build their concept around Vietnam culture, over the quality of the beans."

"The timing happens to be the same as the true specialty movement happening here, and where we are now is a lot more exciting. We're starting to see diversity in the offerings that Vietnam specialty roasters show here, and nuances based on style of serving, setting and style of buying," Frith said.

Diversity stems, as all great coffee does, from the very fields where coffee flourishes.

As the COVID pandemic displaced office workers worldwide away from city jobs, in Vietnam that meant people returning to the rundown coffee farms where the country's bountiful soils produce some of the world's finest beans -- if they're given time to blossom -- and revitalizing them.

Future Coffee Farm, located 180kms northeast of Ho Chi Minh, opened long before the pandemic, but to new coffee farmers with grand ambitions of affecting coffee perceptions, it's an important inspiration -- especially for the much-maligned robusta bean.

As the world's leading exporter of robusta, species of coffee that has its origins in central and western sub-Saharan Africa, Vietnam's coffee economy is built on it. While aficionados often dismiss it as bitter, rubbery and overly caffeinated -- as against the more refined arabica -- the reality is that robusta has never had a chance to shine.

"What goes into changing the process from standard, industrialized, commercialized robusta to specialty robusta, starts with farmers," said Future Coffee Farm founder Toi Nguyen. "Because if you take care of robusta, allow the cherries to ripen and select only the best beans, you get notes that aren't just very good as in arabica -- they're extraordinary."





Owned by 29-year-old Tran Le Minh Truc, Every Half is one of Saigon's hottest new cafes. "Every cup can be the best coffee of your life, just from how you feel about it, how you understand and appreciate coffee," said Tran. (Photos by Mervin Lee)

Nguyen allows his robusta to fully blossom -- 10 months rather than the standard seven -- so that it becomes earthy and rich, with full-bodied notes of fruit and wine -- as well as a new specialty label of 'fine robusta'.

His efforts are starting to pay off: Nguyen's robusta was recently graded 'Excellent' at 85 points by the Specialty Coffee Association (SCA) -- almost unheard-of for the bean -- and quickly leading to export deals as far as Japan and Germany. For a country where robusta plants outnumber arabica 20-to-1, its rebirth could be a game-changer for Vietnam's coffee export market.

"For us, it's about creating a community, changing global views and improving fortunes," said Nguyen. "The farmers I buy from, even with the downturn, we purchase robusta at \$2,500 a kilo, rather than the standard \$1,500 -- it's changing lives."

Quality beans are an important starting point, but it's one thing to have them, another to know what to do with them. Evolution comes through education; for Will Frith -- a 'coffee whisperer' if there ever was one -- that means addressing the dichotomy between quality coffee and an often uninformed public.

Vietnamese on his mother's side, Frith made a name for himself across the U.S.'s burgeoning coffee scene during the 2010s, then returning to his familial roots to help local Vietnamese better appreciate their own coffee. His business Building Coffee, located in a factory space to help potential entrepreneurs start and grow their own coffee business, helps with everything from sourcing and roasting, to packaging, quality control and staff training.

"We're very much that coworking, co-hosting concept, where we wanted to encourage people to dip their toe, see if it's the right fit," said Frith. "Because doing it by yourself requires a huge investment and then you're locked in. We wanted to give people more of a lightweight approach and a consideration point -- and we were a bit more successful than we had planned."

Building Coffee's complete package of international expertise, hands-on instruction and costly commercial-grade machines attracted local coffee entrepreneurs far and wide. A focal point for the specialty movement here, Frith's business has helped to lift Vietnam's stature from ambitiously flailing to finding its footing. "There was a scene of course, but like any new scene, it saw a whole bunch of missteps and necessary mistakes," said Frith.



Vietnam's new wave of coffee appreciation can be traced back to around 2014 when La Viet -- a supply company, roastery and chain of specialty cafes now dotted across the country -- started offering quality beans at affordable prices. "It was a difficult process, especially eight years ago, introducing quality coffee to the local market," said La Viet's founder Tran Quang. (Photos by Mervin Lee)

This brings us back to Vietnam's specialty beginnings. The new wave of appreciation can be traced back to around 2014 when La Viet -- a supply company, roastery and chain of specialty cafes, now dotted across the country -- started offering quality beans at affordable prices (\$5 a bag or around \$1.50 a cup). Serving coffee in sleek, contemporary settings, La Viet convinced consumers used to streetside coffee that Vietnam-sourced coffee didn't have to be mediocre.

In fact, it could be very good. "It was a difficult process, especially eight years ago, introducing quality coffee to the local market -- we weren't sure how it'd be perceived, and it was a struggle convincing farms they'd make more money focusing on quality," said La Viet's founder Tran Quang. "But what we found was Vietnamese coffee has a unique character of its own; it can't be compared to Indonesian or Ethiopian. It's very specific, a mix of tropical fruits and nuts, and that was exciting."

The floodgates had been opened.

Pre-COVID, 'specialty' cafes could be found in every neighborhood in Vietnam's major cities. Anyone with a few green beans and a roasting pan, it seemed, started calling themselves an artisan. But for all the setbacks of the pandemic, the silver lining has been that it has forced the industry to evolve -- and innovate.

"The players in the market are starting to learn that there's more than one way to do this, and more than one palate to please," said Frith. Where it will all lead is not easy to predict, but as with many a struggle for the future, the challenge is between cultural traditions and youth-driven progression.

Lacaph probably embodies the former: launching just as the pandemic started, Lacaph was forced to pivot quickly from its tourist-driven experiential model. Like La Viet, Lacaph now supplies and roasts in addition to its chain of coffee houses. And like any globalized movement, its owners believe in revitalizing Vietnam's historic coffee values.

"Vietnam is one of the very few countries in the world that both produces incredible beans and has a rich culture around its coffee, and that makes it ripe for the global stage," said Lacaph managing partner Timen Swijtink. "We're exporting the coffee and the culture -- the phin filter, the condensed milk, the time it takes to drip as you chat. It's so different from espresso, it's anti-Starbucks -- where culture meets quality improvements."

Equally motivated by the need to innovate, Lacaph's experiments include fermenting coffee beans with other local terroir-driven products such as craft beer and artisanal chocolate. "There's so much youthful ingenuity here, if you have a good idea and the creative science behind it, you can create some really interesting products," said Swijtink.



"Vietnam is one of the very few countries in the world that both produces incredible beans and has a rich culture around its coffee, and that makes it ripe for the global stage," said Lacaph managing partner Timen Swijtink, left. "We're exporting the coffee and the culture." (Photos by Mervin Lee)

With over half of Vietnam's population under 35, youth is the other side of the coffee evolution coin. A glimpse into that Instagram-absorbed generation is Every Half, Saigon's hottest new cafe. Owned by 29-year-old Tran Le Minh Truc, its courtyard setting fronts a co-living space, where the air buzzes with digital nomad energy on any given weekday morning.

The coffee, meanwhile, mirrors Gen Z sensibilities: light and easy, available in myriad styles, and made for everyone without judgment. Beans are from across Vietnam, with a strong focus on fine robusta -- but there's no bias and they'll just as easily brew Kenya or Honduras when called for.

"We're aiming for experiences, different experiences -- because there's no 'best cup'. Every cup can be the best coffee of your life, just from how you feel about it, how you understand and appreciate coffee," said Tran. "It's about quality and sustainability; getting the most out of the flavors, which forms the future of coffee."

Transforming farming, educating entrepreneurs, honoring cultures, delivering innovations and experiences -- Vietnam's coffee world might seem all over the place, but it's an exciting place to be, with diversity firmly at the forefront.

"Eventually we're going to see a mature coffee market here," said Frith. "More choice, more ways to drink coffee, more to explore what coffee can be. But for now, when my U.S. friends ask where they can get those good Vietnamese beans, I get a selfish satisfaction saying, hey you have to come to Vietnam. And I kind of love that."