



VIETNAM'S YOUNG COFFEE PROFESSIONALS DRIVE QUALITY IN THE CITY'S CAFÉS AND ON THE COUNTRY'S FARMS.

Vietnam is the second largest producer of coffee in the world after Brazil. However, the marketability of Vietnamese coffee has been limited by the quality of its beans. Over 97 percent of production is dedicated to robusta coffee, making Vietnam the biggest robusta producer in the world.

Ho Chi Minh City, also known by its former name of Saigon, is the largest city in Vietnam by population. The city center and surrounding areas are literally packed with coffee shops, stalls, bikes, and decked-out cafés.

The most common drinks are made with the *cà phê phin*, a small metal Vietnamese drip filter using dark roast robusta coffee, *cà phê đá* (coffee on ice), and *cà phê sữa đá* (coffee on ice with condensed milk). Most Vietnamese drink their daily coffee in these traditional ways.

But now a new wave of coffee artisans is serving up contemporary versions of specialty coffee for locals and international tourists alike. This new generation of Vietnamese cafés extols quality over quantity and maintains close connections with farmers from the Dalat coffee-producing area in central Vietnam. »



coffee house





SAIGON COFFEE ROASTERY

1st Floor, 151 Dong Khoi Street, District 1
saigoncoffeeroastery.com

Located in the center of Ho Chi Minh City, this little shop is a must-visit. Vo Phap, the owner, opened the café because he was tired of all the low-quality coffee sold on every corner.

Phap uses a two-kilogram Vietnam-made roaster, made by Vina Nha Trang, and he pulls shots on a two-group Slayer espresso machine. Most coffee on the menu comes from Dalat, where Phap does direct business with the farmers, and some imported coffees are also available.

A V60 pour-over of Dalat was simple and good, with honey-like sweetness and low acidity, while an espresso made from Vietnam-grown Typica beans revealed peanut and almond aromas. For traditionalists, Phap serves his version of cà phêphin using freshly roasted robusta.

SHIN COFFEE

18 Hồ Huân Nghiệp, District 1; 13 Nguyễn Thiệp, District 1;
57 Hòa Bình, Hoà Thanh, Tân Phú, District 2
www.facebook.com/ShinCoffee

Shin's founder, Nguyen Huu Long, supplies coffee around Vietnam and also serves as a coffee consultant, barista trainer, and coffee trader on Vietnam's stock exchange. Long also owns four coffee farms around Vietnam, with 100 hectares under cultivation (60 percent robusta, 40 percent arabica).

Since 2015, Long has opened three coffee shops, two of which are located five minutes walking distance from each other in downtown Ho Chi Minh City. All cafés are equipped with two-group La Marzocco espresso machines.

Shin's biggest shop is located in a building across the street and around the corner from some of the city's busiest hotels, ensuring that visiting foreigners get a good first impression of Vietnamese coffee. Spread over three floors, the shop features a five-kilogram Vietnamese roasting machine, a one-kilogram Giesen, and two small-batch roasters for tests. The ground floor features a welcoming bar and main sitting area with a roasting space in the back, and a training center on the top floor.



[A] COFFEE HOUSE

15 Huynh Khuong Ninh, Đa Kao
www.facebook.com/Acafein/

One of the coziest places you'll find in Ho Chi Minh City is owned by Truc Nguyen, who opened the café in 2011 mainly as a place for friends. But word soon got out. Today, Nguyen serves specialty coffee to all comers, and he especially takes pride in serving Bourbon beans from La Viet farm in Dalat.

When he first opened, Nguyen bought V60 and Chemex equipment. He was curious to try out these modern coffee makers but had no clue how to properly use them, until coffee consultant Will Frith (see opposite page) taught him how.

Now, [a] Coffee House has a two-group Rancilio espresso machine and a three-kilogram coffee roaster. Truc direct trades with Dalat and occasionally features coffee from other origins.



THE WORKSHOP

27 Ngô Đức Kế, Ben Nghé, Quận 1
www.facebook.com/the.workshop.coffee

Located in an old, now restored building with industrial décor, The Workshop helped pioneer Ho Chi Minh City's specialty coffee scene.

Co-owner of The Workshop, Tran Nhat Quang also owns La Viet farm in Dalat. Quang mainly uses local beans to promote Vietnamese specialty coffee as much as possible. Through his dual work in the fields and city, Quang maintains a constant connection between the farming community and local customers.

The Workshop is equipped with a five-kilogram Vietnamese roaster and a La Marzocco rests on the bar. Customers have many coffee options, including espresso, V60, AeroPress, and Syphon.



BOSGAURUS COFFEE ROASTERS

Saigon Pearl, Phường 22, Bình Thạnh
bosgauruscoffee.com

Located in the suburbs, in a newly developed area on the Saigon River's shore, Bosgaurus gets its name from the tallest species of cow in the world—white cattle that originated in Southeast Asia. But Bosgaurus has gained more acclaim for its bar, behind which stands Tran Han, Vietnam's National Barista Champion and the Vietnamese AeroPress champion.

Bosgaurus is the official Giesen distributor in Vietnam, as evidenced by two roasters in the back of the innovative floating bar. Hung Nguyen Canh, the owner of Bosgaurus, designed the coffee shop to be a clean laboratory. There are two coffee bars, one of which is used as an educational space where anybody can try to make their own coffee, be it brew method or espresso-based drinks.



Will Frith: Vietnamese Coffee Whisperer

Will Frith believes in Vietnamese coffee. Why Vietnam? “Well, my mom is Vietnamese and that’s what brought me there in the first place,” Frith explains. “But what keeps me engaged is its potential for producing great coffee—and a fascinating café culture that is growing quickly.”

Frith first moved to Ho Chi Minh City after finishing college in 2004. He moved back to the States from 2007–2013, and worked for Batdorf & Bronson Coffee Roasters and Olympia Coffee Roasting Company, both in Olympia, Washington.

He returned to Vietnam in early 2013 on a quest to find high-quality arabica in the mountains of Dalat. During this second stint in Vietnam, he consulted with several specialty coffee businesses in Ho Chi Minh City, and encouraged best practices for specialty arabica coffee production in Vietnam. These days he serves as the Portland, Oregon-based Western US representative for Modbar.

How did you get into the coffee industry?

Will Frith: I grew up in Texas City, on the Gulf Coast of Texas near Galveston. My first coffee-related job was at Mod Coffeehouse in Galveston from 2001–2004.

In 2004 my partner Kelly and I moved to Ho Chi Minh City to begin our first three-year stint in Vietnam, which didn’t involve any work in coffee beyond drinking it every day.

In early 2007, we moved to Olympia, Washington, and I found a job at Batdorf & Bronson Coffee Roasters. This is where my specialty coffee education and my passion for coffee began. I held a few positions there: production and shipping, roaster’s assistant, barista trainer.

In late 2010, I went to work for Olympia Coffee Roasting as production roaster, wholesale customer support, and quality control specialist. They really value and support coffee education, so in addition to learning about roasting and QC, I learned about growing, processing, storage and transport, varieties and lot separation, and their effect on cup quality.

When and why did you move to Vietnam?

WF: In 2013, after a few years in Olympia, I began to think about Vietnam again. It kind of became an obsession. I kept coming back to the same line of thinking—second largest coffee producer in the world, 97 percent robusta ... What about that remaining three percent? What potential does Vietnam have to produce specialty arabica? Can a niche be carved out for it? What would it take to even begin?

What were the projects that got you involved in Vietnam?

WF: I met Quang Tran (La Viet), Duy Ho (The Married Beans Project), Michael Wood and Cana Little (filanthrope), Josh Guikema and Rolan Co Lieng (K’Ho Coffee), and Truc Nguyen ([a] Coffee House), among others, and we shared the common goal of growing both the production and awareness of specialty coffee, via events, trainings, seminars,



and by meeting as many growers as we could. We’d begun to plant the seeds during this short time and this would lead to some successes later on. Soon the specialty coffee scene was beginning to pick up. I still keep in touch with everyone and provide remote support as needed.

While there is big potential for Vietnamese coffee, it’s a hard fight for quality and global marketability. The country’s coffee industry has built its name on being the biggest Robusta producer in the world.

WF: Everyone involved is doing a great job at helping the big picture to improve, but the reality is that it’s going to take some time to steer and grow the specialty market. Domestic roasters are paying high prices for most of the available specialty-grade arabica, in addition to importing specialty coffee from more well-known producing countries. There are definitely enough international roasters willing to try Vietnamese specialty coffee, but the high prices that domestic buyers already pay for every level of quality will keep it out of the international market for more years to come. Until we can increase the supply of Vietnamese specialty arabica, most of it will never see export.

Plus, the price of Vietnamese green beans is influenced by higher labor costs compared to other coffee exporters: Africa, South and Central America...

WF: All coffee-producing countries recognize the fact that coffee is being sold too cheaply compared to production costs. It will take a while to calibrate buyers and the consuming market to this reality, but the impetus lies on buyers’ willingness to pay fair prices for coffee. The fact that coffee farming is usually done by communities living near or in poverty is something that begs several questions about what we’re willing to pay for their crops. Vietnamese specialty arabica producers are very aware of the value of their crop, and they have a small but steady stream of customers confirming this for them. Why should producers be the ones who have to make “price corrections”?

Also, as a percentage, specialty arabica production is still very small. Until we can increase the volume, the supply-demand ratio will continue to price it above coffees of comparable quality. This can only be accomplished over many years with the entire supply chain working together to realize that potential.

Have you experienced difficulty in changing the mentality of farmers to be more attentive to specialty coffee?

WF: Why does this question always fall onto the farmer? Many of them know what specialty production demands, but until buyers can pay them enough to justify the extra labor, it just isn’t feasible. We have to show them through what we’re willing to pay and provide that it’s worth the effort to do business with us (the specialty industry), because it’s much easier to produce commercial coffee at volume than tiny quantities of a high-labor product. It’s partially about correcting what we’re willing to pay, and partially about reorienting our efforts away from the coffee itself and towards the type of grower who is a good fit for a specialty coffee relationship.

How does the Vietnamese specialty coffee industry look today from your perspective?

WF: It’s doing great and learning very fast. When I visited in May of 2017, there was an SCA-certified training lab (Golden Cup Coffee, which has hosted multiple CQI Q & R Grader courses, among others), Vietnam had their first WCE-sanctioned National Barista Championship, and so many specialty shops have opened that I don’t know how many there are anymore.

Are you planning to return to Vietnam?

WF: I’ll always come back to Vietnam as much as possible, and if some projects work out I can return more frequently. I intend to always work with my friends in the Vietnam coffee industry in any way that I can be useful. ☺