

CAFÉ CROSSROADS

RETAILER SPOTLIGHT · with DAN LEIF

Dubsea Coffee

Seattle

Sibelle Nguyen, owner



Many coffee shops aim to put community at the heart of their operations, but few do so with the dedication of Dubsea Coffee. Located in the culturally diverse and traditionally low-income White Center section of Seattle, the shop was picked by the King County Housing Authority as the first commercial tenant in the agency's recently created Greenbridge community. The shop's owner, Sibelle Nguyen, formerly worked for community-development nonprofits in White Center and says she opened the shop because she wanted to bring a gathering space—and great coffee—to the area.

Q: What were you doing before specialty coffee?

A: I grew up in Seattle. When I graduated college I went into the tech world and was in that for a couple of years. For all the travel and the money and all that, it wasn't soul satisfying. I ended up doing one year of AmeriCorps here in White Center. It was basically an after-school tutoring and mentoring program, and I noticed the kids were coming not just for homework help but to connect and have a safe place to go to. When that was over, I did community work here for five or six years. I saw the same thing: Adults needed a space to connect. The different organizations had no informal space to meet.

Q: How did you prepare yourself to then open a café?

A: I left the community work to work for a startup café in downtown Seattle. I saw a lot of the mistakes they were making, and that café ended up closing. Then I moved to Zeitgeist, this thriving Seattle coffee shop, and worked there for two years. The owner really exposed me to what art does in a public space. That was never part of the café concept for me.

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Q: It seems like a lesson that stuck with you. At Dubsea, the art is always changing.

A: I think art is community-building. People come in and look at it, and it makes them feel something. To me, when you see something beautiful that touches you, it brings a sense of joy or peace to wherever you are. At Zeitgeist, I saw how changing art can change a space and bring out different things in people, which was inspiring.

Q: What's it like running a café in public housing?

A: This area was military housing that got converted into public housing, and in the last few years it got completely remodeled. The space got a federal grant to help it go from low-income housing to mixed-income housing. It's a colorful neighborhood now with public art everywhere. The Housing Authority is also very community-minded, especially with incorporating art into the larger community, so a lot of our values are aligned.



Q: One of your goals for opening the place was to give teenagers a space to gather. How have you attracted that crowd?

A: That's the interesting thing for me. Even though that was one of my targets, we're not seeing that customer base. We're seeing adults and people who work in the community. There are lots of young families in this neighborhood because housing is affordable enough that young families can afford it, so we're seeing that customer base as well. There are lots of high school students on our Facebook page as fans, so maybe that's the best way to reach them, but I'm honestly not sure what the best way is.

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Q: Is it hard to have a strong focus on community but also maintain high-quality coffee service?

A: The coffee is a draw for a lot of our customers. They say, "Oh my God, there's good coffee right here in White Center." I love a good cup of coffee, but I'm not the kind of person who knows everything about it. We've had one public cupping and the turnout was great, but our plans also include highlighting coffee traditions from different cultures. There are a lot of Somalis in our community and Cambodians and Mexicans. So we're looking to find people in the community who have that knowledge and want to share it. When it comes to coffee, it's more about the social aspect of it than the technical stuff.



Q: How would you say coffee culture has changed in Seattle over the past decade or so?


A: I feel like there are more places with friendly baristas nowadays. But maybe I'm just avoiding the places that don't have friendly baristas [laughs]. It also seems like there are more roasters now. Since opening a café, I've been really surprised and happy to see there were other café owners who would come by and congratulate me and then say, "If you need any help, call me." It's amazing that people are that open and willing to share. ☺

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