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From the Silicon Valley Business Journal:

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Small Business, Big Mission

Small Business, Big Mission: Why Nirvana Soul's cofounder says it's vital the cafe be known as a Black-owned business

Oct 26, 2020, 6:38am PDT

Sisters and San Jose natives Be'Anka Ashaolu and Jeronica Macey never expected such a big turnout at the September grand opening of their new coffee shop, Nirvana Soul, which replaced Caffe Frascati in downtown San Jose.

But after months of pumping up the big reveal on social media, the coffee-and-waffle joint opened to a line of several dozen on Sept. 26 — in a pandemic, no less.

Ashaolu, a technology marketer, is heading up marketing for the cafe, as Macey — a longtime barista and cafe manager — serves as CEO. The two proudly market the shop as Black-owned — a decision they made after George Floyd was killed by a police officer in May.

Ashaolu, a Gunderson High School alumna, sat down with the Business Journal to talk about the decision to push forward in a pandemic, and what it means to open a Black-owned business in 2020.



TOMAS OVALLE

Sisters and San Jose natives Be'Anka Ashaolu, left, and Jeronica Macey opened their new coffee shop, Nirvana Soul, at the former site of Caffe Frascati last month.

Be'Anka Ashaolu

Title and company: Chief marketing officer, Nirvana Soul

Company headquarters: 315 S. First St., San Jose

Company description: Cafe selling coffee, espresso drinks, loose-leaf tea, and sweet and savory waffles

Number of employees: Six

Year established: 2020

How did you and Jeronica end up deciding to open a coffee shop together?

Well, a lot of this is a realization of Jeronica's dream. She's been in the coffee business for 17 years. She wanted to start her own coffee shop really early on in that journey. She started at Peet's in Willow Glen, and then went on to several other coffee shops. She ended up getting her degree in that time.

She was doing a lot of, "Being a barista's not a real job," then she'd come back to coffee, where she would manage shops and then she would help other owners open up their shops. By the time she got home from Sacramento to San Jose, we were both in a position where we were ready to do something big together.

And I'm kind of, like, crazy optimistic. I think everything is possible, whereas Jeronica is probably a little bit more discouraged than I've been in my life. So, a combination of things came together at the right time to make this a reality. That's really how it came to be: It was a dream of hers, and I'm annoyingly pushy, and here we are.

Can you talk about the unique challenge of opening a cafe during a pandemic? Did you ever think, "Maybe we shouldn't do this right now"?

Our SBA loan closed almost right at shelter-in-place, so before we did it, we were like, I guess if we were going to jump ship, we would have done it then.

I always said, we were never going to stop no matter what happened. Obviously, you can't anticipate something of this magnitude or scariness, but we were in it. We were in so deep, we came so far, we were like, "We're not turning back."

Nirvana Soul has had a social media presence since long before you opened up. Can you talk about your marketing strategy?

If there was any strategy behind it, it was just to be transparent about what we were doing. We didn't really know what to do at all. Once we put it on a vision board and said we were going to do it, it was literally Google-searching every single step of the way.

Because it was so difficult for us to find information and to know what to do next, we just wanted to share that with anyone else who might be interested, curious or wanted to start their own business, too. That was probably the most strategic part about it, just being open.

You've marketed Nirvana Soul as a Black-owned business, and the cafe has a mural that says "Black-owned." Can you talk about the significance of that in 2020?

Oh, man. Post-George Floyd is the first time Jeronica and I really talked about being a Black-owned business.

We didn't want to talk about it. It was sort of something that hung in the air in certain interactions that we had along the way with advisers, with banks — so we just decided we were going to laugh it off. At the same time that we said we would never stop, we said we would also laugh off anything that feels even remotely like racism to us.

... After George Floyd, we felt an incredible sense of responsibility to talk about it and to mention a little bit about what our experience has been like. We always come from a place of love and peace and togetherness, and we believe very much that those are the things that are going to help us make it and to become better people.

... As you go about trying to effect change, and as you go about denying that these things exist, just recognize that there are some people who are living in a completely different America than you might be living in, and you've got to be a little bit kind and empathetic about that. That's all we ask of people going into it.

We're proud to be a Black-owned business. We know what this means to people in this community, and this is people of all colors who have come in emotional, crying. They bring gifts: "We're just so proud of you," "I never thought I'd see this in my lifetime."

... Being a Black-owned business, especially here in Silicon Valley, is so rare and uniquely challenging, so for it to actually happen, we should be proud of that. That is something everyone in this community should be, like, "Look, we're San Jose and we did that."

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