

2026

ROASTER
of the YEAR

MACRO CATEGORY

DRIFTAWAY COFFEE

Brooklyn, New York



MOST ROASTERIES START BY SELLING at farmers markets. Or to wholesale clients. Or with a cafe. Driftaway Coffee is different.

In a one-bedroom apartment in Brooklyn, New York, Driftaway started as a coffee subscription company—a roastery designed to serve customers

online. Co-founders Anu Menon and Suyog Mody came from outside the coffee industry. They were engineers who had spent a decade as corporate marketing consultants but were feeling unfulfilled. The idea for Driftaway was to create a physical product they could be proud of.

Free from preconceived ideas about how a roastery “should” start, they began in a setting familiar to them—online. “That’s where we’re comfortable,” says Anu. “That was the world we came from, so from the beginning, the idea was to do it online.”

While that might not sound like a radical concept today, when they founded the company in 2014, it was unusual. “We didn’t even think it was really odd to be completely honest,” says Suyog, “until we started meeting people in coffee and they were like, ‘Digital? Really?’”

Since its inception, Driftaway has continued to chart its own course, from designing its Farmer Feedback Program that collapses the supply chain and its Bean for Bean program that donates to coffee science to establishing equity metrics in its coffee buying program and opening a weekend-only tasting room rather than a traditional cafe.

The consistent through line for Driftaway has been a scrappy spirit of data collection, experimentation and evolution. An unwavering focus on systems and a can-do attitude have led Driftaway Coffee to be named *Roast Magazine’s* 2026 Macro Roaster of the Year.



Lead roaster Ian Terry roasting. *Photo courtesy of Driftaway Coffee*

THE WINNER’S STATS

ROASTING OUTPUT 125,683 pounds
ESTABLISHED 2014
LOCATION Brooklyn, New York
EMPLOYEES 14
LEADERSHIP Anu Menon and Suyog Mody, founders and owners
RETAIL LOCATIONS 1
WHOLESALE PARTNERS 46 as of September 2025 (fewer than 10 at the end of 2024)

WEBSITE driftaway.coffee

FEEDBACK FIRST

Though their idea was to start online, Anu and Suyog knew they needed to test their product with real people. At the beginning, this meant roasting in small batches at home, designing packaging themselves, and sending bags of roasted coffee to friends and family for feedback.

Suyog recalls, “Being sort of adjacent to tech back then, we were heavily influenced by [the book]

COVER PAGE

Driftaway Coffee co-founders Suyog Mody and Anu Menon.

Photo courtesy of Driftaway Coffee



Anu Menon cupping coffee. Photo courtesy of Driftaway Coffee

The Lean Startup. The whole idea is to do the bare minimum to try to reach customers and get feedback as quickly as possible. So, we recruited about 10 to 20 friends who were all in different stages of coffee love—you know, [from] Folgers to more serious like Blue Bottle back then. And we were like, ‘Hey, we’ll just send you coffee. Will you talk to us for 30 minutes after you try it?’”

It wasn’t just about putting coffee in people’s hands; it was about listening carefully to what those people said after they sampled it. That curiosity—and some creative problem solving—led to the creation of the Explorer Box, the tasting kit that is still at the heart of Driftaway’s subscription model. Each kit includes five small bags of coffee, spanning the flavor spectrum from fruity, classic and balanced to bold and extra bold. It invites customers to taste different coffees side by side, compare them, and discover their own preferences in a way most coffee consumers have never experienced.

Genius as it is, the Explorer Box wasn’t dreamed up in a strategy meeting. It emerged organically, and somewhat accidentally. At one point in Driftaway’s early days, Anu and Suyog were running low on a particular coffee, so instead of sending a larger bag of one coffee they shipped a few smaller bags of different coffees. Suyog remembers their friends responding

positively, telling them, “This is really cool, because I don’t normally get to try coffee side by side in these smaller portions. I liked this one for this reason and didn’t like that one for that reason.” That moment crystallized an idea that underpins Driftaway’s offerings: Give customers the tools to explore and let them decide what they like.

What started as a scrappy workaround quickly became a defining philosophy for the company: Feedback is the foundation of Driftaway’s business. By putting discovery in the hands of customers and treating every data point as an opportunity to learn, Anu and Suyog built a model that was both approachable and empowering. In an industry where many roasters tell customers what they should like, Driftaway paddled upstream, inviting people to pinpoint their own tastes and using that feedback to shape how the company moved forward.

BUILDING SYSTEMS

The Explorer Box is a critical component of Driftaway’s ethos and an exemplification of the company’s belief in building systems to solve problems rather than finding one-off or temporary solutions. This is another strength Anu and Suyog brought from their past lives as engineers and marketers. “Before coffee, our world was basically building systems,” Suyog explains, “building platforms and systems for big customers. A lot of our approach is not just how do we impact something in a one-off way, but how do we build a system around it so we can do it on an ongoing basis?”

That systems mindset has influenced nearly every aspect of Driftaway’s operations. The Explorer Box isn’t simply a sampler set. It’s the foundation of a subscription feedback system that collects and organizes customer preferences. Feedback from the Explorer Box flows into a database that shapes individual customer subscriptions, informs roasting and green buying decisions, and creates a living archive of consumer taste. What began as an accidental fix for a coffee shortfall is now a carefully engineered structure for ongoing learning.

The same thinking led to the company’s Farmer



Feedback and Bean for Bean programs, which we'll explore in more depth in the pages that follow. With Farmer Feedback, Driftaway took the data it was already collecting from customers and built a channel to funnel that information back to producers, collapsing the long chain that typically separates farmers from the people drinking their coffee. With Bean for Bean, the company steered clear of one-off fundraising campaigns and instead hardwired ongoing contributions to World Coffee Research into every bag it sells, providing steady and measurable support for scientific coffee research, a priority that came directly from farmer feedback.

Even Driftaway's consumer education model follows this logic. Early on, Anu and Suyog realized that different customers desired different levels of knowledge. Instead of designing one method of sharing the information they thought was most important, they built a "Paddle, Swim, Dive" framework to meet their customers where they are. A casual "coffee curious" customer can skim a postcard and get the basics, while an "aspiring enthusiast" might scan a QR code to access maps, producer stories and processing details. "Deep enthusiasts" can dive into cupping scores, brew parameters and more. In this way, Driftaway can connect with each customer in meaningful ways because the framework is designed to anticipate and meet each customer's needs.

COLLAPSING THE CHAIN

For Driftaway, the systems approach was never an end in itself. The goal isn't to optimize for efficiency or collect data for its own sake. Instead, every system operates in service to the company's guiding motto of "People First, Coffee Always." Nowhere is that philosophy more apparent than in its Farmer Feedback Program.

The initial inspiration for this program came in 2017 on Anu and Suyog's first trip to origin, when they traveled with a group of roasters on a producer visit organized by Café Imports. Suyog remembers standing with the Aguilar brothers on their farm in Costa Rica. "We were just kind of standing around, introducing ourselves ... and we started asking them the question, 'How can we help? What can we do better?'," he recalls.

Instead of asking for schools or community projects—which many roasters were focusing on at the time—the brothers asked a much simpler, more personal question: "What did you think of our coffee?"

That moment hit hard. "It was honestly the most simple, straightforward question," Suyog says. "Not complicated. Just, 'Who is drinking our coffee, and what do they think of it?'" In that moment, he and Anu realized that producers rarely, if ever, hear what consumers think of their coffees. In a supply chain

LEFT

Informational postcards are the first layer in Driftaway's "Paddle, Swim, Dive" consumer education framework. *Photo courtesy of Driftaway Coffee*

RIGHT

Driftaway's 100 percent women-produced "She Roars" blend showcases the company's commitment to working with historically underrepresented producers. *Photo courtesy of Driftaway Coffee*



Educator Julien Langevin performs coffee tasting education sessions.

Photos courtesy of Driftaway Coffee



full of intermediaries—exporters, importers, roasters, baristas—the farmer and the consumer rarely get a chance to connect.

Because Driftaway’s model was already built around consumer input, the company was uniquely positioned to bridge that gap. From the start, every customer could submit feedback on every coffee they received, which was logged into Driftaway’s systems. For Anu and Suyog, it wasn’t difficult to adapt this existing structure into the Farmer Feedback Program, a formalized channel to send comprehensive consumer feedback directly to producers. As Anu explains, “We just basically built it into our website. So, all the ratings that people were leaving, we could collect those, anonymize them, and then put it into a report that we would send back. Sometimes it goes directly to the farmer, sometimes to the exporter, but it closes the loop.”

Though the program is simple, that doesn’t negate its significance. Many roasters don’t even send their own feedback to producers when they receive samples, yet Driftaway has found a way to share hundreds of real consumer impressions—what customers liked, what they didn’t like, which profiles resonated—directly with the growers.

It’s also a powerful example of Driftaway’s outsider advantage. Coming from tech and marketing, Anu and Suyog viewed feedback loops as obvious, even necessary. But that’s not the case in coffee. By collapsing the supply chain, they made a direct human

connection across continents. What started with one conversation in Costa Rica has since become systemic to their business model and a tangible illustration of their commitment to keep the coffee producer at the center of their work. As the Farmer Feedback Program continues to grow, Driftaway hopes it can serve as a model for the industry, proof that sharing honest consumer impressions is not only possible but can be truly transformative.

CONTRIBUTING TO THE BIGGER PICTURE

While the Farmer Feedback Program is about linking two ends of the supply chain, Driftaway’s Bean for Bean program is about deepening resources and knowledge within the coffee industry itself. Both programs grew from realizations Anu and Suyog had while talking with coffee producers.

“When we talked to producers about their biggest challenges,” says Suyog, “it wasn’t schools or hospitals. It was climate change, uncertainty of coffee production, and pricing.” Those conversations solidified Anu and Suyog’s desire to invest in long-term resilience for the coffee industry and to support farmers with more knowledge and better tools.

The solution they landed on led them to create the Bean for Bean program, a commitment to contribute 5 cents for every pound of coffee Driftaway roasts to World Coffee Research. (Bean for Bean was initiated by Driftaway and differs from World Coffee Research’s



Coffee and education go hand-in-hand at Driftaway's new Tasting Room. Photos by Dyske Suematsu

"Checkoff Program," through which roasters donate anywhere from 1/10 to 1 cent per pound of green coffee purchased.) Since the program began in 2017, Driftaway has donated close to \$27,000 to the organization, which leads agricultural research to secure a sustainable future for coffee production.

The Bean for Bean program also reflects Driftaway's broader philosophy of collapsing gaps in the supply chain. Just as the Farmer Feedback Program closes the communication gap between consumer and producer, Bean for Bean aims to help close the resource gap by creating a direct line between consumption and agricultural research. Customers may not see it in their daily brew, but behind every bag is a contribution to the future of coffee farming.

PEOPLE FIRST AT EVERY LEVEL

Staying true to its motto of "People First, Coffee Always," Driftaway has built its identity around equity and inclusion in the supply chain and in its own operations.

On the sourcing side, Driftaway has made it a priority to buy from smallholder farmers, women-led farms and other underrepresented producers. In 2024, the company roasted 89 coffees from 19 countries, and 56 percent of those lots were purchased directly from women producers or women-managed cooperatives. Anu and Suyog proudly note that the



company achieved farmgate pricing transparency for 81 percent of the coffees it bought in 2024, an unusually high benchmark in the specialty industry. They also strive for clear communication, offering quick sampling, concise feedback and fair timelines to the producers and exporters they work with.

That same people-first philosophy extends to their own team. As an immigrant-owned, women-led company, Driftaway employs 14 people in a mix of in-person and remote roles, and the company is proud that 93 percent of its staff comes from underrepresented communities. Employees are paid 20 percent above New York minimum wage, with hourly rates ranging from \$18 to \$28. There are structured pathways for growth, annual reviews with pay adjustments, mid-year check-ins to keep career development on track, and a culture of healthy and flexible work-life balance. Benefits include paid time off, free Citibike membership and life insurance for all employees, as well as health, vision and dental insurance for full-time employees.

Suyog says Driftaway's approach is about building systems that ensure that fairness isn't an afterthought. Just as the company listens to producers about what they need most, it listens to employees about their goals and aspirations. In both cases, systems are designed with equity as the foundation, not something to aspire to.

Those same values—an emphasis on inclusive

sourcing, strong education and training, and experienced operations—also underpin Driftaway’s wholesale approach. By carrying these principles into partnerships with cafes and restaurants, Driftaway has built a fast-growing wholesale network rooted in the same equity and transparency that guide its sourcing and team culture.

SUSTAINABLE BY DESIGN

Sustainability is also foundational, not an add-on project or a marketing campaign, and it’s built directly into the way Driftaway roasts, packages and delivers coffee. The company roasts on a Loring S35 Kestrel, one of the most energy-efficient commercial roasters on the market; ships coffee in compostable mailers and plant-based bags to reduce waste; and has measured and offset its footprint to achieve carbon neutrality. The carbon offset calculations include not just roasting but also shipping emissions, an important factor for a business built on direct-to-consumer logistics.

Finally, sustainability for Driftaway is about advocacy. By using its social media platforms to highlight issues producer share and hosting frequent producer events at its roastery, the company draws much-needed attention from consumers who otherwise might not be aware of the problems at origin. For Anu and Suyog, all of these efforts reflect a simple truth: Environmental and social responsibility must be embedded in every bag, every roast and every shipment.

THE TASTING ROOM

After more than a decade of operating as an online-only subscription-based roastery, Driftaway took a new step in February 2025 and opened its first physical space, but true to form, it isn’t a traditional cafe. Instead, it’s a six-seat tasting room inside the roastery, open only on weekends—a space created deliberately for education, exploration and connection rather than everyday coffee service.

The tasting room was not an excuse to get into retail, but rather a natural iteration of what Driftaway



was already doing. Long before 2025, the company had been inviting producers into its roastery for small events, cuppings and conversations with customers. Those gatherings revealed the power of face-to-face connection. As Anu says, “We were already hosting producers, already telling stories, already using the roastery as a gathering place. The tasting room was just the next step. It formalized something that was already happening and gave us a way to share it with more people.”

The menu reflects Driftaway’s focus on exploration and discovery. Guests can choose from a rotating menu of coffee beverages or order a curated flight—like the Funkytown, a selection of three experimentally processed coffees served black; or Three Ways to Coffee, which includes a pour-over, a one and one (espresso plus a macchiato), and a citrusy dark-roast espresso tonic. The intention isn’t to sell drinks but to lead guests through structured tasting experiences and storytelling that make producers’ work more tangible.

Anu and Suyog have discovered that the tasting room provides a live feedback loop. Every weekend, they learn directly from the customers in front of them which descriptors stick, which stories resonate

Suyog Mody preparing a pour-over. Photo by Dyske Suematsu



Suyog and Anu have found their passion in the world of specialty coffee. Photo courtesy of Driftaway Coffee

and which details fade. “What’s one or two things that make this coffee unique? That’s what people remember,” says Anu, “and that’s what we take back into how we talk about it online.”

The tasting room has quickly become more than a destination for a weekend coffee. It’s a living lab that refines how Driftaway connects producers and consumers, strengthening the company’s direct-to-consumer subscription model and its growing wholesale business, which expanded from fewer than 10 accounts at the end of 2024 to 46 wholesale customers by September 2025. It embodies Driftaway’s core principles of learning continuously, adapting with intention, and always keeping people at the center.

LOOKING FORWARD

Anu and Suyog see the undervaluation of specialty coffee as one of the biggest challenges in the industry today. “You can walk into a store and buy a bottle of wine for \$30 or \$50 without thinking twice,” says Suyog, “but with coffee, people struggle to pay \$20 for a bag, even though it’s more labor intensive,

more fragile, and honestly involves way more people. The industry hasn’t done enough to help people understand why coffee should be valued higher.”

They believe Driftaway’s unique model—grounded in transparency, feedback and education—is one way of tackling that problem. By collapsing the supply chain and letting consumers hear directly from producers (and vice versa), they are striving to make value more visible. By giving customers tasting frameworks and discovery tools, they are creating space for curiosity and appreciation. And by treating everyone—from producers to employees to customers—equitably, they hope to illustrate that value is intrinsic to the system.

Looking toward the next five years for Driftaway, Anu and Suyog plan to double-down on the things they’ve already built while continuing to evolve, from expanding the Farmer Feedback Program to include more useful and actionable data for producers, to opening additional tasting room-inspired spaces where people can experience coffee in intentional ways, to deepening Driftaway’s wholesale program by partnering with values-aligned shops and restaurants.

“The whole point of Driftaway has been to keep learning new things,” says Anu, “to not assume we know what’s best, and to adjust when we find out otherwise.”

Driftaway’s story proves that specialty coffee doesn’t always have to follow the same familiar patterns. In fact, maybe it takes an outside perspective and a willingness to chart unfamiliar waters to move the industry forward in a truly meaningful way.



KAT MELHEIM is a coffee roaster, writer, educator and creative force. Known as @RoasterKat on Instagram and YouTube, she shares her passion for coffee through engaging content that covers everything from origin adventures and behind-the-scenes roastery insights to practical tips and tools for roasters. Melheim is the founder of Coffee People Zine (est. 2017), an art magazine that celebrates the creativity within the coffee community. She now brings her expertise to Algrano, where she serves on the onboarding and content teams.