

Bringing Communities Together One Cup at a Time feat. Martell Mason

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Tommy: Welcome back to another episode of “Northeastern Next.” On today's episode, we have Martell Mason, the CEO and head roaster of the Sepia Coffee Project. In this episode, we'll discuss his work as a coffee importer-exporter in Turkey, teaming up with a fellow Northeastern alumna for his work in the coffee industry and the goal of the Sepia Coffee Project. Let's get into it.

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Tommy: All right, hi Martel, how are you doing today? Thank you so much for joining the “Northeastern Next” podcast.

Martell: Thanks so much for having me.

Tommy: Yeah, no, we're really excited to have you. So, you're in Detroit right now, right?

Martell: That's correct. I am here in Detroit. Weather's looking good so far and yeah, it's a good day.

Tommy: Good, yeah, the weather's looking great here in Boston too. It's gonna be 80 degrees this weekend, so that's exciting. Very interesting stuff.

Martell: There you go, yeah.

Tommy: Yeah. So, just to kind of start us off, do you mind just giving us a little bit of background on yourself? You know, maybe what you studied at Northeastern, what you're doing right now, just sort of like a big picture, who is Martel?

Martell: Yeah, so Martell here again. I graduated from Northeastern IAF International Affairs Department. I graduated in 2007, so it's been—what is that? —15 years or so, you know, that I've been away from Northeastern and yeah, and I'm working in the coffee industry.

Tommy: Awesome. So, just to kind of start at the beginning of your coffee journey, and you could tell me if I've jumped to the middle when I say this right now, but I just remember from our preliminary phone call, you mentioned that you had an importing-exporting company in Turkey, right?

Martell: That's right. I mean, if we go kind of to the beginning, you know, my first job at Starbucks, you know, turned 16 and, you know, I thought it would be cool to work in the coffee industry.

Late 90s, early 2000s, coffee was really growing here in the U.S. and so, you know, I definitely wanted to be a part of that community. After graduating from Northeastern in '07, spent a little time on the East Coast, but I left the U.S. in 2009 and it was around that time that I started thinking about graduate school and kind of what I wanted to do, you know, with my life. And so, coffee came back to the surface and, you know, I really wanted to understand coffee value chains and supply chains.

So, fast-forwarding to Turkey, I started an import business in Istanbul in 2017, essentially importing specialty-grade coffees to the market, working with Turkish roasters, but also roasters throughout what I call West Asia, right? So, anywhere from Ukraine all the way over to Oman. So, this was a really great opportunity to bring great coffee and great stories to an area that historically is known for coffee, but when it comes to the specialty market and specialty coffee, introducing something new to consumers.

Tommy: So, is that what drew you to Turkey in the first place? Was that just an area that was known for coffee?

Martell: No, actually, I have to thank Northeastern for this. During my undergrad years, I was part of the Dialogue of Civilizations program. And so, I actually did two dialogues in Egypt, in Cairo. And so, that was 2004, I think, and 2005. And so, that was really my first introduction to this part of the world, really being able to absorb not only the culture, but the food, the people, just everything. And so, coffee is a huge part of the culture in this region. And so, I've always just had this interest in learning more about the process.

Tommy: Yeah, absolutely. And I can definitely see, kind of like what you were saying about how you were importing and exporting specifically in West Asia. I can understand now, truly, how coffee... I'm not... Personally, I'm not a coffee drinker, but I can understand how it is a little bit of a universal language, which is very cool. And it sounds like that you're almost a living embodiment of that sentiment too, which is very, very interesting. Yeah, go ahead.

Martell: Sure. I was going to say, starting a business in kind of the melting pot for the region, Istanbul, if we go back in history, we know the Ottomans really controlled the coffee market for centuries. And so, to be a part of, to have that energy kind of around you, it was just a really great experience to, again, be introducing a new product to a market that is just known for trade. So, I learned a lot, continued to learn a lot, and it just made some really great relationships along the way.

Tommy: So, how long were you in Turkey for?

Martell: I was there for just about four years.

Tommy: Oh, okay.

Martell: Yeah, yeah.

Tommy: Nice.

Martell: Pretty good period of time. During that process, of course, it wasn't just being based in Turkey. I was traveling quite a bit and spent a lot of time in East Africa.

Tommy: Oh, that's awesome. So, after Turkey, did you come back to the US?

Martell: So, I, like millions of others around the world, with the pandemic, a lot of us had to pivot. I started seeing changes in the economy in Istanbul prior to the pandemic. We were looking at ways to really grow our business, but as a foreigner and moving a product that is really connected to global markets and financing, there were some challenges and hurdles for us. And so, I was looking at other opportunities within the region to potentially move the business, but the pandemic kind of halted all of these types of opportunities.

So, I was in Istanbul—actually, I was in Turkey—and going to Saudi during the time of the pandemic and flew to Saudi Arabia February 2020 and was literally in lockdown in Riyadh. So, spent about a year, like again, the rest of the world, just trying to manage during the pandemic. And so, I returned back to the States in 2021. And that was really just to try to take a breather from everything that was taking place and try to see what the next chapter in Martell's coffee world was going to be.

Tommy: So, that kind of helps me with my next question. So, it sounds like this next chapter for you would have been opening, and I saw on your website, it's not a coffee shop, it's a boutique, right?

Martell: Yeah. So, we kind of call ourselves right now, we're like a boutique roastery. We're a small batch roastery here.

Tommy: Yeah. I was just wondering what that transition was like from having in importing-exporting business in West Asia, and it sounds like you were covering a lot of ground there, and then coming over to the United States, not only is it a totally, I'm sure, a different atmosphere, but you did it during a pandemic too. So, just what was that transition like going from importing and exporting in West Asia to opening a coffee boutique in the US, especially during a pandemic?

Martell: Well, I think it definitely was not planned. However, I think our generation really knows how to make the right moves, right? It's more of cushioning yourself and just knowing, okay, this didn't work out, let's move on to the next thing.

Before kind of getting into Sepia Coffee and kind of the development here, again, kind of go back to my academic studies. So, my grad work focused on coffee value chains, supply chains, and sustainability. So, really understanding the links to this commodity from the farm to the cup was always part of my DNA and part of the mission to truly understand how this market works and how we can be more involved in it.

So, when we think about supply chains, you have the farmer, you have the supplier, the exporters, and then we talk about market, you have the importer, you have the roaster, and you have the cafe, right? And so, I was already a part of bottom end of the supply chain. And so, now, coming back to Detroit and seeing great opportunities here to be of service to a growing coffee community, I said, "Well, I don't see a lot of roasters, one that look like me, being a minority person, and also seeing that there are several underserved communities within not only Detroit, but throughout the US." And so, essentially, that's where everything kind of came together in order to create Sepia Coffee Project.

Tommy: And that actually, again, that helps me transition into my next question a lot, because I know you mentioned your mission in that previous answer, but that was something that I saw on your website, was that Sepia Coffee wasn't referred to necessarily as a coffee shop or a boutique, per se, but I kept seeing Sepia Coffee Project, and project really jumped out to me in that instance. And I would love for you to be able to elaborate on just the project. I know that's kind of a big question, but I would love to hear everything about it.

Martell: Yeah, a lot of people ask, "Why do you have the project on the end?" Some of our regulars, Sepia Coffee or just Sepia, so we do kind of have all these aliases now. But with creating the brand and naming it Sepia Coffee Project, I knew that this was really just the beginning of something much bigger. I see Sepia Coffee Project as an umbrella group that will, in the future, have all of these brother and sister companies that are offering quality goods and services, especially within the food and beverage industry, to larger markets.

We still have a lot of food deserts, we have coffee deserts. And so, what we're trying to do is to highlight that every community, it doesn't matter your demographic, your income level, should have access to goods and services. And so that is essentially what the project means.

We definitely want to work with people within the food industry here. Also, it's happening in New England as well. But if we think about Detroit, if we think about some of these larger urban communities that have experienced decades of blight, if you go in some of these cities, you see very large masses of land.

And so thankfully, those who were within the food industry said, "Hey, you know what, we can actually do an urban farm here. Let's try to get more of the community to see that they can actually start growing some of their fruits and vegetables." And so, coming back to Detroit, seeing this taking place, seeing all of this great energy where people are buying local, I was just like, we need to have a coffee shop.

We need to have a black roaster that is actually roasting coffee right in the city. This is something in 2021 that I was surprised wasn't already happening when I returned. So, the long story or the long answer to your question is that Sepia Coffee Project, hopefully within the next three to five years, will be opening up doors to other opportunities within the food and beverage industry.

Tommy: That's incredible. You know, thank you so much for that answer, because it sounds like you're, and you can totally correct me if I'm wrong. But like, if I were to summarize the mission, it looks like you're trying to make an impact not only on the local Detroit level, but you're just trying to almost overhaul the entire operation of the industry and just make it as accessible to everybody as you can. Is that correct? Is that sort of along...Okay.

Martell: Definitely. Yeah, that's correct. If we talk about some of the challenges that we're facing within our cities, you know, we use this term, this word gentrification, right? I like to just really focus more on the development side of that. Because, you know, I think when we think about gentrification and gentrifying, there are so many variances to it. You know, if I am a Black person who has made millions of dollars, and I'm going into an underserved community, and I'm trying to make development, in some ways, I am part of that gentrification, right? Because I have access to financing or other resources.

So, I try to look at it for the greater good. What can this development really do to the people who are still there? And how can we ensure that they're not displaced further? Right? So, when I think about that, what we're trying to do when I think about development is the first, the three things that you normally see when development starts to take place is a coffee shop, a bakery, and an upscale bar. Those are the three things that usually pop up first.

And then with that, you get other people coming in with their businesses and ideas, you get the artists coming in, you're getting those who are a bit more grassroots coming in. And so, what I see Sepia Coffee Project doing and Highland Park, which is a very underserved community of Detroit, is bringing that energy to the surface so that people can see, ah, there is potential and opportunity here. This is not just in Detroit.

If we think about Boston, we have we have Roxbury, Roxbury Crossing, we have parts of Dorchester, right? These are areas that were black and brown folks, right? And in some ways, they were displaced, right? Rents are not getting any lower in Boston, right? So, there are a lot of things that can kind of connect to the fact that we do need to be able to offer these types of services.

Tommy: Yeah. And I think that's an incredible goal you have in mind, and one that's going to resonate with a lot of people.

So, that being said, it is a little bit of a big task for one person. And I love how Sepia Coffee, Sepia Coffee Projects, just a very community-based project, I guess, for lack of a better word. So, how can people not even in the Detroit area, but just all over the country, or all over the world, you know, seemingly, since you have global connections, how can they help Sepia Coffee Project be able to just reach these goals?

Martell: First and foremost, you know, we're currently working on a build out here in Highland Park. Highland Park does not have a coffee shop. And so, we are currently working on a development to open the first coffee shop and a new roasting facility. So, we're actually on [wefunder.com](https://www.wefunder.com) right now, we're doing a community raise.

And so that's a great way for everyone, both here in the US as well as internationally to support, you know, our efforts to bring good coffee and good people to the community. Another way that you can support indirectly is going to your local coffee shop, going to your local roaster, right? Getting on their monthly coffee subscription plan, right? These are all ways that we can support local and minority businesses. When we talk about percentages and data, you know, it's across the board.

Within the coffee industry, there are not many minority roasters around the US, I probably could count maybe 50, you know, if that. So, you know, we do have a long way to go, but we're making really, really great strides. And I think with the pandemic, and, you know, with 2020, with Black Lives Matter, there's been more discussion about having more equity, representation and diversity within all industries.

And so, I believe Sepia Coffee Project is shedding light on the fact that this is a product that we all consume every single day, most of us. Coffee is the second largest traded commodity in the world beyond oil, right? So, the fact that we're moving so much product around this world, and if we think about who's actually growing that product, they're all black and brown folks, right? If we think about where coffee is grown, it's in the tropics, right? Between Capricorn and Cancer, right? All of those places, all minorities, right? So, what we're saying is that on the market end of it, we also need that equity, right? And so that's essentially Sepia, but also just, again, giving awareness to the fact that we have to be more connected with products, especially food and beverage. I mean, these are things that we consume every single day.

So, it's great to have a bit more transparency in what we're doing, but also knowing that it's going back to the people.

Tommy: I think that's an incredible cornerstone to have in this project, because I think that you really are hitting the nail on the head with everything being so community-based. And the transparency, I know that's very much appreciated, especially in this day and age where we live in a little bit of an era of misinformation, if I'm being completely honest. So, I think that's awesome to hear for those listening. We would love for you to support Martell in any way you can. So, the link to that WeFunder will be in the description of this podcast.

And then just to shift a little bit to Northeastern, I know we touched on your Northeastern days and that was the global dialogues, right? That you were a part of?

Martell: Yes.

Tommy: That's awesome. But to my understanding that you also work with a Northeastern alumna, how did you two get in contact with each other?

Martell: Yes. So, one of my business partners here with Sepia Coffee Project is Maria Hernandez. And we actually met at Northeastern, but we also worked at Saks at Copley. So, we have had this very long relationship, 20 years, I guess now. And it's been a blessing. What I always loved about being at Northeastern and then being an alumni of Northeastern is that we really were this global community. And despite the distance and the time, the relationships that you made at Northeastern, they stand.

And so, I left the US in 2009, but even being gone for so long, these relationships were still quite strong. And so, when I returned to the US and I thought about the idea of opening up Sepia Coffee Project, I reached out to a few friends that were always supporting me outside. And I said, "I'm back home, let's do this."

And Maria was one of the first who was just like, "I'm on board." Maria is Filipino American. And so, the fact that, again, we're trying to just get more communities to be able to be involved in coffee in this way, was something that she really loved. Her aunts and uncles back in the Philippines grow coffee. A lot of people don't know that the Philippines is a coffee producer. And so, for us, what we want to do as we build this brand is to really highlight some of these smaller producing countries so that people can see that coffee is really this wonderful product, but it has such a great history and story behind it.

So, Maria is really, really great. She's still in Boston. She's working and has two children. And yeah, we're hoping that we'll be able to soon have an outlet in the Boston area. That way we can really have these 360 experiences when it comes to our background. Again, Northeastern has played a huge role in that. And so, yeah, we're just grateful, but also just, it's great to just see so many Huskies doing really, really great things around the world.

Tommy: Yeah, it truly is. And I think it's safe to say that you're one of them.

Martell: Thank you.

Tommy: Yeah, no, absolutely. I think you're doing a great thing here. And I really also love how much you touched on, Northeastern is so global, but at the end of the day, it really is just a community. And I think that you really are exemplifying that to the best of its abilities. Now, the last question, and since we are "Northeastern Next," I always ask, what's next? So, what's next for you, Martell?

Martell: Well, what's next is we're breaking ground. We really want to get this roasting facility and coffee shop off the ground. But when we think about new ideas and segues, we definitely want to work more on introducing byproducts of coffee to the market. It's not only about being sustainable, but it's about using every single product that we can from the coffee tree.

And so, we have a couple of things that we're working on. We know that some people don't drink coffee. So, we're going to have some alternatives that are very herbal and very similar to teas. And so, yeah, we have some really fun and cool projects up our sleeve. But until then, we are definitely looking to build up and scale up. And so, we're looking for support from our community. But there's so much more to come. And who knows, maybe we'll be on the campus very soon.

Tommy: I think that will be an amazing thing. I'm sure that the campus would be more than happy to have you. But, hey, I wanted to say it's incredible stuff you are doing, I love that you are using coffee as a vessel to really just do greater things for the world. So, thank you for what you do. And thank you so much for joining the podcast.

Martell: Thank you so much. I really appreciate it. And yeah, to your listeners, continue to listen in. There are some great stories ahead.

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Tommy: Thanks for listening to this week's episode of “Northeastern Next.” Are you or do you know a Northeastern alum with a great story to tell? If so, email us at alumni@northeastern.edu to be featured on a future episode of the pod. I hope you enjoyed the episode, and I'll see you the week after next.

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