

The Virginian-Pilot

Vessel Craft Coffee opening flagship store in West Ghent

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DEC 10, 2021 AT 12:16 PM



Vessel Craft Coffee is one of Selden Market's incubator tenants. Courtesy of Karen Corrigan

Sarah Cowherd traveled around the world in her previous job as a nurse. Those travels and a love of coffee inspired the Norfolk native to launch a business, Vessel Craft Coffee, on the internet and out of her home.

That was five years ago, and after a successful stint in Norfolk's Selden Market, Vessel will open a flagship stand-alone store in spring 2022 at 1229 West Olney Road in West Ghent's Chelsea Business District.

"I did not expect it to grow this quick," Cowherd said. "But the need and the demand for specialty coffee is big. And this area was really hungry for it. So we're excited."

The new space in West Ghent is 3,600 square feet and will house the company's wholesale business and a cafe area. Cowherd said the cafe will have a bar, seating and a roaster, where people can see the entire process, from roasting to tasting to packaging.

"It's a different, more immersive experience for people who love coffee," she said.

The space is quite the leap from selling beans online.

Following her travels, Cowherd, 36, began her business with a goal of sourcing coffee directly from smaller farms in South and Central America and Africa. She sought farms that paid workers higher wages than national minimum wage in a country or ones that used green farming methods. The farms she visited as a nurse that paid higher wages had better health outcomes, Cowherd said.

"We do a lot of research with the farms that we work with to make sure they're setting themselves apart in the market a little bit," she said.

The first farm she went to was in Matagalpa, Nicaragua. Vessel still has coffee from a farm in a neighboring town. Depending on the harvest months in

countries, Vessel may have coffee from Central and South America, Ethiopia and Indonesia.

Cowherd said Norfolk has a strong coffee culture, which helped cement the idea for the business. Her mother, Karen Corrigan, joined in as the company grew. With a background in health care business strategy and development, Corrigan, 67, handles the business and administrative aspects of Vessel.

“I joined her to help out more on the business side of things, like how you scale a business and the infrastructure you put in place,” Corrigan said.

In October 2017, Vessel joined Selden Market as one of the first incubator tenants and eventually became a mentor tenant, helping some of the other incubator tenants while maintaining a physical presence. Selden Market supports local businesses with low rent and low-risk options.

“From day one, Vessel Craft Coffee has been a model incubator business,” said Selden Market director Careyann Weinberg. “Sarah opened her shop with a great product and a strong brand. ... Sarah applied to Selden Market with a very detailed goal of having a standalone coffee bar and roastery in Norfolk, and she remained dedicated to that vision. It’s really inspiring to watch her bring that vision to life in just a few years.”