

Wise Words with Alejandro Velez and Nikhil Arora



Recently, there has been an increased interest in grow-your-own options as food prices rise globally. Two men who are well familiar with this self-sustaining model are Alejandro Velez and Nikhil Arora, who founded [Back to the Roots](#) in 2009 after successfully growing a bucket of oyster mushrooms in their college kitchen. Their grow-your-own kits are sent out by mail order, and can flourish with only the use of recycled coffee grounds. This low maintenance approach means that their kits can be used by anyone, regardless of how limited the space available.

Both founders graduated from the University of California, Berkeley. When they began their studies they aimed to enter the finance sector, specifically investment banking. However, by the time they reached their final semester their ambitions had shifted and after successfully growing one bucket of mushrooms on recycled coffee grounds they decided to become full-time urban farmers. With the help of a USD 5000 grant from their university's chancellor and initial interest from eco-friendly chain, Whole Foods, Nikhil and Alejandro set up Back to the Roots. We first covered the urban farming initiative back in 2010, and we recently caught up with the two founders to find out how they've progressed.

1. Where did the idea for Back to the Roots come from?

We heard in a lecture that it was possible to grow mushrooms on used coffee grounds. We started experimenting, selling fresh mushrooms to local groceries, and when people started asking us how they could do this too, the idea took off. We made a "Grow Your Own" Mushroom Garden, and started laying out the values we wanted in a company, including hustle and passion. We wanted to create something good in the world, something positive.



2. Can you describe a typical working day?

A lot of emails, a lot of chatting, a lot of brainstorming. There are also usually non-stop phone calls and meetings as well! The day starts as soon as our eyes open - we're on our phones right away with email, etc. Since we're on the West Coast, even if we wake up at 5:30 or 6, the day is already well started on the East Coast.

3. How do you unwind or relax when you're not working on Back to the Roots?

It's all about the music - Pandora and Rdio are my constant companions!!

4. What's the secret ingredient to success as an entrepreneur?

Hustle. You have to always keep moving, thinking, and being excited about what you're doing. If you work as hard as possible, you can make what you want happen.

5. What drove you crazy when building your business?

Lack of passion - we quickly aligned with people who shared the same sense of passion and urgency towards doing good through business and leaving a positive mark on this world. It's infinitely more rewarding to work with people who have a passion and zest for life and for whatever they do!

6. What motivates you to keep going?

Knowing we can make a positive difference with our business and that we can help kids learn about food. Not to mention working with people who are just as excited about education, food, and sustainability as we are!

7. If you were to start again, what would you do differently?

Invest in design and our branding from Day 1 - we've since learned how absolutely critical design is to our success! I still laugh when I look at our first mushroom kit box and initial POP signage!



8. Where do you see your business in five years, and how will you get there?

Back to the Roots wants to spend time on product development, and hopefully in five years will have a fuller product line with more options for people to learn about growing their own healthy food. We're focusing more attention on what we do best – brainstorm new products and develop them – and making the BTTR brand a well-known name in the food industry so that people know we're a resource in sustainable food.

9. If you weren't working on Back to the Roots, what would you be doing?

We'd be in investment banking and consulting - we actually gave up job offers in those fields when we decided to start BTTR.

10. Tell Springwise a secret...

Creating new products and building a company can be daunting, but it's always fun! :)

11. Any final words for aspiring entrepreneurs?

Hustle!

Thanks Nikhil and Alejandro!

You can read more about Back To The Roots [here](#), or visit the Back To The Roots website [here](#).