

FEATURE STORY

Where Spartan Coffee Roasters Began: Two Alumni and a Dream

Michigan State University's Union Building has a different feel early in the morning. A little bit before all of the students come rushing through, it seems quiet. The building is still waking up as baristas complete their opening tasks.

For Jamal Rivera and Priya Desai, it's a familiar setting. Almost a decade ago, they walked throughout the same campus as students, balancing classes, part time jobs and the uncertainty of what would come after graduation. Now, they're back, but this time, they've brought something with them.

Spartan Coffee Roasters.

What started in Lansing in 2023 as a small-batch, fair-trade roasting company has made its way onto campus, but not just as another coffee shop. For the alumni founders, it's something that means even more. A way to take what they learned as students and turn it into something current students can experience for themselves, by Spartans, for Spartans.

Spartan Coffee Roasters employs 15 Michigan State students in roles that go beyond making drinks. Some help manage operations. Others work in marketing. A few are part of paid management internships where they learn how to lead, make decisions and understand how a business runs.

"Students aren't just working here. They're building skills they can take with them. They know that, work hard, and they are excited for what great opportunities they'll get to apply these skills to," Rivera said.

For many of those students, the experience feels different from a typical job, which they have expressed in interviews. It is not just about showing up for a shift. It is about being part of something that connects to their future.

Rivera and Desai understand it all so well. As alumni, they remember what it felt like to be in that in-between stage, trying to gain experience while still figuring things out. Bringing Spartan Coffee Roasters to campus is their way of giving that opportunity back. The impact only starts with students, it isn't even close to stopping there .

Spartan Coffee Roasters is built around the idea that small, everyday choices can lead to something bigger. Through its partnership with Michigan State University, the company contributes 10% of its annual profits to student scholarships and sustainability initiatives. For students in the Union, that means something as routine as buying coffee connects directly to support within their own community.

That same sense of intention carries into how the company operates.

Spartan Coffee Roasters sources fair-trade beans, roasts them locally in Lansing and uses compostable cups and packaging aligned with MSU sustainability efforts. As conversations around sustainability continue to grow on campus, the focus is not only on doing the work, but also on being transparent about what that work looks like in practice.

“We are committed to continuing the transparency of our sustainability efforts to show what it looks like in practice,” Rivera said.

Inside the Union, the space begins to fill. Students walk in between classes, meet friends or find a place to sit for a while. The energy builds, and the quiet of the morning shifts into something more familiar.

For Rivera and Desai, it’s a full-circle moment, but it is also just the beginning.

What they have created is not just a business on campus. It is a space where students can gain experience, feel connected and be part of something that reflects their own time at Michigan State.

Similar to many things on campus, it becomes part of the routine. This time with a little more meaning behind it.