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Food & Lifestyle

Mary Nguyen scales Olive & Finch as she bets on downtown Denver



Mary Nguyen poses at Olive and Finch on April 29, in Denver.

SETH MCCONNELL | DENVER BUSINESS JOURNAL



By [Jenna Barackman](#) – Reporter, Denver Business Journal
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Story Highlights

- Mary Nguyen's Olive & Finch Collective operates four restaurant and wholesale brands across Denver.
- Nguyen is opening several new airport locations in 2026, including a new full-bar concept.
- She serves on boards for Visit Denver, the Denver Downtown Development Authority and other organizations.

On any given afternoon, you may find Mary Nguyen behind the stove, mentoring a young entrepreneur or sitting down with developers to talk about how to bring life back to a downtown block.

It's a familiar rhythm for the founder of Olive & Finch Collective. Nguyen has spent years developing restaurants while becoming an increasingly visible figure in Denver's business, civic and nonprofit circles. Through her company, she oversees a growing group of four restaurant and wholesale brands along with a hospitality management arm.

Beyond her own businesses, Nguyen serves as a board member or chair for four nonprofits and city organizations and spends time mentoring youth through local organizations.

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Nguyen sees that work as tied to a broader responsibility to the city as it works to recover from the Covid-19 pandemic and attract more businesses and foot traffic into the city's center. She has continued to open new locations and invest in core neighborhoods, positioning her restaurants as part of a larger effort to draw people back and support surrounding businesses.

“I think we can all do a better job of changing the narrative – we have to,” she said. “I think we should, because we all live here and we all love living here. Let's all make it better together. And so, if I can do my part and show another operator that, you know, I'm investing, then I absolutely will.”

With four openings slated for this year, including the debut of a new concept at the Denver International Airport, Nguyen is leading Olive & Finch Collective into its next phase of growth.

A leap of faith

Owning restaurants wasn't always Nguyen's plan.

Nguyen's parents were Vietnamese refugees who came to the U.S. after the end of the Vietnam War, working constantly as they built a new life, she said.

Nguyen recalled being largely raised by her grandmother as they worked. But Sunday nights were different.

It was a weekly ritual she described as “sacred family time” when her parents often weren't working, and the whole family gathered around the dinner table to

enjoy Vietnamese food. Those Sunday dinners would eventually translate to a passion for hospitality and influence how she runs her restaurants.

“I think, now, in retrospect, that my love language is food... I bring people together and the community together through food,” she said.

Nguyen initially followed a traditional path, taking a job after college as an investment banker for high-net-worth clients. As the daughter of first-generation Americans, it was instilled in her from a young age to get a good education and then find a job that was respectable and provided security, she said.

But she did not feel fulfilled, she said, and instead found purpose in experimenting with recipes and hosting dinner parties.

“I realized I wanted to go into hospitality when I would go into work early just so I could download recipes from Martha Stewart or Epicurious, the only two websites,” she said. “I was more concerned about cooking and finding recipes.”

Nguyen eventually left her lucrative career in finance to pursue owning and operating her own restaurants. But first, she had to learn how to do it.

For over a year, Nguyen worked three jobs, earning no more than minimum wage at each, to learn about the industry. Nguyen described rising at 3 a.m. to work in a coffee shop, then heading to Hapa Sushi in Cherry Creek to work as a sushi chef apprentice for the lunch shift. After that, she headed to The Beehive, a now-shuttered fine dining restaurant, to work the dinner shift.

It was exhausting, she said. But to Nguyen, after leaving her career, there wasn't an option to quit or fail.

“There was never an option because my parents had given up so much,” she said. “I had given up so much.”



Mary Nguyen at Olive and Finch on April 29, in Denver.

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She opened her first eatery, a Vietnamese and French fusion restaurant called Parallel Seventeen, in 2005, carving out a niche within the Asian food industry in Denver that, at the time, was filled primarily with pan Asian eateries. Six years later, she opened another Asian fusion restaurant, Street Kitchen Asian Bistro.

Both restaurants eventually closed, which Nguyen said was the result of both restaurants completing their life cycles, she said. The closures also allowed Nguyen to focus on a new project: a counter-service, upscale-casual concept called Olive & Finch, which opened in 2013.

What began as a passion project that allowed Nguyen to experiment with new kinds of food quickly gained traction, Nguyen said.

“As we started really realizing that our brand really resonated with people, and I started feeling this freedom of being able to cook whatever I wanted... that really gave me the opportunity to open up the book and do so much more,” she said.

Today, Olive & Finch has five full-service locations and anchors a collective of brands that include coffee shop Little Finch, which has two locations, and grab-and-go kiosk business Finch, on the Fly, which has two locations in the Denver International Airport.

Her original goal of making chef-prepared food affordable remains central to the company's growth, Nguyen said. That has prevented her restaurants from making steep price increases, even if it cuts into profit margins, she said. The company also offers full-time employees benefits like health insurance and a 401K match.

Part of her ability to keep prices low stems from the diversity of Ngyuen's business model. While restaurants are the face of the company, other verticals, such as Olive & Finch's wholesale business and hospitality management, give the company the ability to be flexible with growth. Plus, her brands see a large volume of customers, making it easier to avoid steep price hikes.

"We're not looking for the same margins as everyone else," she said. "I'm okay with not making the same margins as others. I also think that our job as a restaurant and my job as someone who loves this industry is to create space and opportunity and community... So if I could offer a \$20 steak and my team benefits, I'm going to do that."

Nguyen plans more concepts

Nguyen isn't finished expanding. In 2026, she will open [three new airport locations](#) including the debut of a new, full-bar concept called Bar Finch.

Olive & Finch already has a presence at the airport with two Finch, On the Fly kiosks in the Jeppesen Terminal and near gate A48. In 2026, Olive & Finch Collective will open a Little Finch, an Olive & Finch and a new concept, Bar Finch, all located in the C Concourse.

"I'm not gonna say it's easy, like I'm sure some people would think that we're crazy," Nguyen said about the rapid expansion. "But at the same time, it's just like,

you know, it's great to be able to bring our brands to different places.”

For Nguyen, expansion isn't necessarily about the margins, but rather about creating communities, partnering with the right landlords and being able to experiment with the kinds of food she loves, she said.

She plans on continuing to scale her brand over the next several years, predicting she could double her employees to 300 in the next five to 10 years. She also has new concepts in mind, including a full-service fine dining concept under Olive & Finch Collective.

Besides the Olive & Finch brands, Nguyen said she would eventually like to open a sushi restaurant, a niche of the restaurant industry that has historically excluded female sushi chefs.

“When I left to open up my first restaurant in 2005 I was the only female executive sushi chef,” she said. “I would love to do so much more. Because, yes, Olive & Finch and Little Finch and Finch, on the Fly is part of what we do, those are our three verticals, but we also have this whole other arm of the business, our management company that does things completely differently.”

“We can run [new concepts] and execute them to a very high level,” she continued.

Downtown dedication

There's a reason Mary Nguyen's restaurants can be found on the streets central to downtown Denver's recovery, including 16th Street, the Golden Triangle neighborhood and Union Station.

Nguyen said she is asked to open new locations frequently, which she views as an honor since developers are actively seeking to put her brand into their projects.

Olive & Finch does not have any investors, so the decision to expand often comes down to whether she can make an impact on the block where she opens

a restaurant and whether she can form a good partnership with the landlord, she said.

She knows that her concepts can have positive impacts on city blocks, she said.

Last month, she opened Olive & Finch's [largest location yet](#) in Denver's Golden Triangle neighborhood.

"I just think that you know it's important to know what's on your first floor and how that activates your block and your building," she said.

Nguyen has been a passionate advocate for the revitalization of downtown and volunteers her time to help improve the city, serving on boards including [Visit Denver](#) and the [Denver Downtown Development Authority](#). She also serves on the board for the Asian Chamber of Commerce and the Emily Griffith Foundation.

She also seeks to better improve the Mile High City in other ways, spending her time volunteering as mentor for many organizations including Work Options for Women, Asian Girls Ignite and Denver Public Schools' Junior Achievement.

She sees community work with young girls as a duty and a privilege, hoping to rectify disparities she experienced when she was young and saw no one who looked like her in meaningful leadership positions. She also said that since she is a first-generation immigrant, she sees helping others be successful alongside her as a responsibility.

"I probably absolutely would have benefited from having someone show me the ropes and to teach me how to navigate things... but I never had that, and that's why it's so important for me to make sure that I'm mentoring," she said.

Nguyen has [intentionally chosen downtown for many of her new locations, even if her businesses take hits](#) as a result of unpredictable foot traffic and construction difficulties. She believes that she, along with other business owners, have a responsibility to help change the narrative about downtown Denver and bring people back into the heart of the city.

“If I don’t, who will?” she said.

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2	2	Park Meadows
3	3	FlatIron Crossing

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