Alumni

The Columbia Startup Lab Throws a Birthday Party

Entrepreneurs help celebrate five years of innovation.

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The smell of success is in the air at the five-year-anniversary bash for the Columbia Startup Lab in SoHo. Success and ... sesame oil.

It's a warm Wednesday evening, and as another working day comes to an end, the lab — an office space and business incubator for alumni entrepreneurs — closes and a celebration begins. Behind the lab's oversize garage-style doors, venture capitalists in suits and open shirt collars mingle with twentysomethings in jeans and

hip sneakers. All food and drinks are provided by Columbia-connected businesses, many of which got their start at the lab. In one corner, Bryan Cowan ’16BUS and a team from his company Wisefish Poké fill cardboard cones with brown rice, ahi tuna, and sesame-laden shoyu dressing — the source of the warm, nutty scent perfuming the air.

At the next table are brisket sliders from the Texas-style barbecue chain Hill Country , owned by Marc Glosserman ’06BUS, and Beijing-style wraps from Mr. Bing, brainchild of Brian Goldberg ’02GSAS. Upstairs in the mezzanine, which overlooks the collaboration-friendly office space, partygoers crack open ice-cold cans of rosé from the Drop, founded by Alexis Beechen ’15BUS, and sample Japanese munchies from Bokksu, a snack subscription service from Danny Taing ’14SEAS.

It’s clear that the Startup Lab knows how to have fun, but it also has a serious lineup of speakers — Columbia President Lee C. Bollinger; Merit Janow ’88LAW, dean of the School of International and Public Affairs; and Richard Witten ’75CC, special adviser to the president and Columbia Entrepreneurship founder. And as they take the mic, a bigger picture of what the lab has done for both the Columbia community and the city emerges.

“We live in a time when modern research universities must throw off the constraints of traditional academic silos to develop new and productive responses to society’s problems,” Bollinger says. “The Columbia Startup Lab is a quintessential example of the new academic ecosystem.”

In its first five years, the Columbia Startup Lab has launched over 250 companies, in fields from financial tech to fashion to social entrepreneurship to food. In total, these early-stage ventures have raised more than $55 million in funding. And while most startups take nearly a decade to mature from founding to acquisition, the lab has already seen four companies acquired in major deals — including two businesses from the lab’s first year: the design-software company Frustum and the prenatal-nutrition company Bundle Organics.

Liz Wilkes ’13BUS, a member of the inaugural group, says that being a part of the lab was integral to the success of her company, Exubrancy, which provides on-site wellness programming like massages and yoga classes to more than five hundred corporations across the country.

“I was constantly meeting with people — investors, wellness professionals, potential corporate clients,” she says. “Having a real space where I could conduct those meetings made it feel like a real company, even in the earliest days. It made a difference when we were presenting ourselves to the world.”

But, Wilkes says, the lab was far more than just a workspace and a place to bring clients. For her, it was a community that gave her the support she needed.

“Starting a business can be very lonely, which is hard both personally and professionally,” she says. “Because of the Columbia Startup Lab, I was surrounded by people going through similar challenges. Five years later, my company has outgrown the office space. But when I’m trying to work out a problem with the business, people from my cohort are always my first call.”

As the night winds down, guests take their last bites of flaky baklava from Eat Offbeat, a catering company that employs refugee chefs, cofounded by Manal Kahi ’15SIPA and Wissam Kahi ’04BUS, and down “boozy pudding shots” from Spoonable Spirits, a liquor-friendly dessert company from Kelli Lipson ’19BUS.

But in the actual office space, no one is turning out the lights just yet. Instead, people migrate back to their desks, reopen their laptops, and jot down notes on the whiteboards hanging on nearly every wall. A new cohort has just started at the lab. And they have work to do.

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