

2022  
**ROASTER**  
*of the* **YEAR**  
 MICRO CATEGORY

**LITTLE WAVES  
 COFFEE ROASTERS**



*By Ever Meister*

**ONE OF THE MANY REASONS IT'S** hard not to fall in love with Durham's Little Waves Coffee, *Roast* magazine's 2022 Micro Roaster of the Year, is that the company's creation itself is a love story—Areli Barrera Grodski and Leon Grodski Barrera's love story, in fact. The couple met in Areli's hometown of Cherokee, North Carolina, where Leon was the co-owner of a coffee shop—a place where Areli began to realize that coffee was more than just a drink.

"I think what drew me to coffee was it being a place for community. Having grown up in Cherokee since I was 10, and not having a coffee shop there, I didn't even know that we needed one," she says. "When it was there, it was this beautiful moment of realization for me. I was really struck by how important the coffee shop was for the community. I wanted to be a part of it: I wanted to work there."

Leon came to North Carolina on an artist's residency at Western Carolina University and decided to stay and open a coffee business with a partner who was a member of the Eastern Band of Cherokee. "It fulfilled, over time, this important role in the community, and we still have a lot of close connections and loved ones in Cherokee," he says. The cafe also fulfilled an important role in the burgeoning relationship between Areli and Leon and was the catalyst for a lifetime of building and nurturing their business together. Areli describes it as having an emotional urgency. "If you're not creating something all the time, you would die—that kind of a thing. I think that's kind of the root of how we've approached a lot of things, even our

**HEART-DRIVEN**

Little Waves Roastery Team: (from left to right back and right to left front) Michael Harwood, Brianna Bandy, Luna Juarez, Leon Grodski Barrera, Mandy Spirito, Ariel Studenmund, Maricarmen Paz Hernandez, (kneeling) Areli Barrera Grodski and Orapin Brent. *Photo by David Solow, mural by Michelle Durango Lopez*



Leon Grodski Barrera and Areli Barrera Grodski at the La Marzocco Cafe Little Waves Coffee Roasters Residency in Seattle.  
*Photo by Jenn Callender*

**THE WINNER'S STATS**

- ROASTING OUTPUT:** 58,542 pounds
- ESTABLISHED:** 2010
- LOCATION:** Durham, North Carolina
- EMPLOYEES:** 34
- LEADERSHIP:** Areli Barrera Grodski and Leon Grodski Barrera, owners
- RETAIL LOCATIONS:** Three

**WEBSITE:** [littlewaves.coffee](http://littlewaves.coffee)





Cocoa Cinnamon and Little Waves Coffee Roasters team in front of the company's first location in the Old North Durham neighborhood. Photo by David Solow

marriage. It happened really quickly, and yet it has just felt right. That's kind of the current that we've been on since day one, of both getting married and starting our business because those two things are very intertwined."

Those two momentous occasions took place in 2010, a year the partners say was very challenging for them, despite their ambition, love of community and devotion to each other. In order to feel connected to the history and stories of the various global cultures that impacted and affected their life trajectories, they developed a fantastic appetite for books that offered a deeper look into the context of the incredible and awe-inspiring products that, for many people, now seem simply "everyday."

"I was doing a lot of reading, and you know, when you start with a history of the Cherokee Nation, that leads to George Washington's biography, and George Washington leads to Simón Bolívar, and Simón Bolívar leads to Captain Cook, and Captain Cook somehow leads to Genghis Khan, and when you start looking at all of these things then you come back to Columbus

and ask, 'Why was Columbus looking for the Indies?' 'Why did Vasco da Gama round the Cape [of Good Hope]?' Coffee and spices have intermingled as long as coffee has been spreading a drink widely through the Islamic world, then beyond," Leon says. "The first coffee houses were in Cairo, Damascus and Aleppo—places where spices had been coming in via millennia-old trade routes. To this day, one will frequently be served spices in coffee throughout the Middle East." Areli and Leon named their retail brand and brick-and-mortar shops Cocoa Cinnamon, in part as an homage to that history.

All of those histories and stories not only inspired the couple to think more deeply about things they realized most people take for granted—spices, chocolate and, of course, coffee—but also to make the connections about both the beautiful and the violent stories of human involvement in how we value, extract and interact with those products.

Cocoa Cinnamon "came to Leon in a dream," Areli says. Leon adds, "We envisioned it together at a cafe table in Verona, Italy, just after we got married."

"We had been reading books about chocolate and the history of chocolate, and we decided that we were going to start Cocoa Cinnamon in my mom's kitchen by making chocolate—something we both had never done before," Areli says with a laugh. "The story is what really drove us: the history of cacao and the indigenous people who grew it."

A year later, in 2011, those stories drove them to take their last \$75 and start building a mobile coffee unit they called bikeCOFFEE, which brought the Barrera Grodskis' love of coffee and community to the streets of Durham. By 2013, they had funded their first brick-and-mortar Cocoa Cinnamon location with a combination of elbow grease, slow money, grants and enthusiastic crowdfunding.

"The bike led to some pretty extraordinary community support, which still exists. We knew we wanted to be a roastery from the beginning, but we were starting with so little," Leon says. They took their time building the retail business, kept learning as much as possible about coffee, and were able to open Little Waves Coffee Roasters in 2017. The roastery is



housed in Cocoa Cinnamon's Lakewood neighborhood shop and serves as the supplier for the three Cocoa Cinnamon locations as well as online retail, wholesale and subscription customers around the country.

The Barrera Grodskis are partners in work and in life. "I run the shops more, Areli runs the roastery more," says Leon. They have welcomed a leadership team to help the business grow, both in terms of quality and in terms of what they're able to achieve. The other dynamic duo of Little Waves is that of longtime coffee professionals and certified Q Graders Michael Harwood (director of coffee quality and innovation) and Mandy Spirito (director of roasting and quality control).

"Michael knew us when we were a bike, and we kept that relationship throughout the years," Leon says. "Mandy coming on as head roaster has been extraordinarily important, and Mandy is doing an extraordinary job. I think in the roastery you have the craft, you have the service, but you also have 'the way.' I believe all of those things affect flavor. It's this multidirectional thing where if they're all aligned just right, something good happens."



### MAGICAL REALISM, PRACTICAL APPLICATION

If that multidirectional alignment sounds a bit mystical, you are starting to get the Little Waves picture in full: There is magic threaded through everything that happens at Little Waves, and it is all intentional.

"The name Little Waves stems from a text message in those early years of Leon and I falling in love," Areli explains. Finding herself awestruck by the Great Smoky Mountains and the snaking rivers and tree-filled landscape (and having just finished reading *One Hundred Years of Solitude*), Areli was trying to capture her feelings for Leon in a series of "text messages that were like magic. He wrote me back this message about 'little waves rushing up the shore,' which to him are the little waves of Long Island, where he grew up."

Leon adds, "On the north shore of Long Island, the waves are very small and calm, and just a beautiful calming cadence."

"That imagery and that cadence and that beauty of little waves coming up on the shore—it just felt

LEFT Michael Harwood, director of coffee quality and innovation, doing some wholesale coffee education at Daphne's Coffee Shop in Littleton, North Carolina.

RIGHT Mandy Spirito, director of roasting and quality control, loading a batch to roast on Little Waves' Loring S15-Falcon. Photo by David Solow





Maricarmen Paz Hernandez, production roaster, in the middle of a production day at Little Waves Coffee headquarters. Photo by David Solow.

right,” Areli continues. “The name makes sense in the broader picture of what Cocoa Cinnamon is—those daily actions that we use as a way of creating change.”

The intersection of that sense of magic with the deep intentionality that runs through everything the Barrera Grodskis do is not only the heart of the business, but also the foundational principle that grounds it to reality. Areli notes that it is the force that causes them to actively consider things like, “How are you thinking about your sourcing? How are you treating your people? How are you *paying* your people? How are you paying the producers and thinking about the sustainability of it all? What are the things that we can do right now with the money that we have available to us?”

The questions are not rhetorical to the couple—they have sought to build systems, protocols and protections into their business in order to make sure that what seems like a distant, mist-covered dream actually has some roots in the day-to-day operations they both experience on this plane.

One example that Leon offers is an “Unlock Document” that Little Waves has on file, which came out of years of conversations and input from across their team, as well as conversations specifically with Harwood. “I was asking Michael, ‘In your experience

having worked in many different roles, what would be your ideal? One, what you think from a value standpoint would be really great for a workplace, and two, that would attract the best people in the industry?’” They discussed things like pay rates, time-off policies and other “moonshot goals” that Areli often talks about. Together they created a document that’s a way to track their progress and projections. “We have this to say, ‘When we hit this revenue level, we get to unlock this.’”

“When we hit \$10 million a year revenue, we can achieve every unlock that we’ve defined that we want,” Leon says. “Then you reverse-engineer that: ‘What does that mean? What do I have to do?’ I mean, \$10 million is a tremendous amount of money, and in the scheme of some roasters, it’s nothing.”

Last year, the company roasted nearly 60,000 pounds on a Loring Roaster, supporting three cafes, 25 full-time and nine part-time employees and a growing number of wholesale and at-home customers. Though their list of goals to unlock is long, they have already intentionally created a space that aims to support not only the people behind the counter, but also those walking through the doors and in the surrounding areas (more on this in a moment). The Barrera Grodskis guarantee a livable wage for all employees, starting at a minimum of \$15 per hour. The company also offers paid time off for full-time employees.

“From that nucleus, everything else kind of emanates; the ripples that we’ve been talking about,” Areli says. “It is that pulse that makes us want to provide a livable wage for how we pay our team, how we pay for coffee, and how we create enough revenue to make our business feel more attractive to other professionals. It’s not gonna happen tomorrow, and I think that’s the hard part for us because we want to see it happen faster—but this work is not fast work.”

**“IT’S ALWAYS BEEN ABOUT COMMUNITY”**

Who comprises the Little Waves community and how does that combination of dream, magic and reality intersect in the social-emotional environment that the

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**TOP** Mandy, Ariel and Mariah doing a quality control production cupping at Little Waves Coffee.

**LEFT** Michael Harwood, doing a latte art session with wholesale partners, Coffee & Spice in Greenville, North Carolina.

**RIGHT** Ariel Studenmund, wholesale manager and production roaster.

business occupiers? It is more than simply a talking point for Areli and Leon—it has led them to make decisions and take definitive actions to create a real version of the visions they carried for so long.

“I want to talk a bit about what it’s like to work in a setting where it’s predominantly women and nonbinary people, and 50-50 women of color,” Areli says. Not only is it deeply important to both her and Leon that the staff be representative of communities that have historically been marginalized in coffee and in society in the United States, but it is also one of the couple’s goals to create opportunities for professional growth, financial security and a feeling of empowerment. “We need to pep ourselves up more and be more confident in this. You can use the beauty of roasting and continue to hone those skills and get more women of color roasting, and we want to

continue to foster this environment where men don’t feel intimidated being led by women and nonbinary folks.”

The community of Little Waves Coffee Roasters extends far beyond the doors of any Cocoa Cinnamon shop. It includes the neighborhoods where they sit, as well as the people around the country and the world who savor their coffee, and the global network of producers with whom and from whom they source coffee. Before unveiling their three retail locations, the Barrera Grodskis made a commitment to do the ongoing work of building relationships with community leaders and institutions, to use their contribution program as a way to deepen that trust and impact within the existing culture of the neighborhoods, and to make their shops as inviting as possible, so as to say, “We want you to know that this is for you, too.”

That same attention and intention is the driving force behind the green coffee sourcing. Rather than simply pick and choose only the popular coffees of the moment, Areli focuses on fostering relationships that align with the vision and mission of the company—a way to make those little waves ripple out farther and farther around the world. Through a handful of close connections with smaller importers who are engaged in the work of building bridges between producers and the roasters who buy their coffee, Areli has been able to form meaningful, lasting relationships that have led to more intentional sourcing.

“How do you support communities on both ends [of the supply stream]?” Areli continues, “I think the answer for me has been, how can you buy a wide array of different grades of coffee from the same producers in a way that allows us to price something at a more accessible rate while also supporting some of the higher-graded coffees that they are actually profiting from?” Areli and Leon, along with their team, recognize that coffee grading and consumer preference and value do not always correlate.

“Our guests and clients have varied flavor preferences and we use that to our advantage in our sourcing,” Leon says. “We are committed to buying high-quality coffees within that range. This allows us to source varied coffees, some show-stoppers, and



also others across the range of specialty that support farmers more, please retail and wholesale guests, and set healthier buying patterns in motion through time.” In this way, they harness to their own ability to add value to coffees that provide stability to producers while also providing customers with an accessible, magical moment of caffeinated joy. “I do think we need some show-stoppers,” Leon continues, “but how does our system of purchasing, and purchasing through time, create an array that actually builds the relationship and honestly contributes to sustainability?”

The key to doing even more of that type of buying is also held in the moonshot goals of the Great Unlock. “Right now we have a very small space in which we work,” Areli says, “but seeing the volume grow overnight during [the covid-19 pandemic] and implementing this subscription program have allowed us to buy way more coffee from producers because we know that we have this constant stream of coffee orders that we have to fulfill.”

### GOOD THINGS BY ACCIDENT (AND HARD WORK)

“Intentionality” is not an accidental theme of Little Waves Coffee’s story; it is the whole plot. Throughout their lives and work, Leon and Areli came to realize that things like community do not simply happen to you, you happen to each other. Setting a course

of intentionality does not necessarily mean doing everything right, but it is the way the partners see their opportunity to learn, grow, evolve and build an ongoing net positive impact—what they call *rooted reverberations*.

“I feel like we’ve always been very intentional, but it’s always been intentional within the knowledge that we hold as humans at that point,” Areli says. “So there’s always a kind of reflecting back and moving forward, reflecting back and moving forward,” Leon adds. “That is the only way we can grow as humans.”

“I really do believe that when you’re hitting your stride, all sorts of good things happen by accident,” he continues. “We have our plan, and we can’t wait to see what the accidents are that we could never expect.”

For now, while basking in the feeling of pride and joy that comes with being named *Roast’s* Micro Roaster of the Year, the couple might give themselves permission to heed these words from *One Hundred Years of Solitude*: “It’s enough for me to be sure that you and I exist at this moment.”

**LEFT** Pin Brent, production assistant and barista at Cocoa Cinnamon.

**MIDDLE** Areli Barrera Grodski, green coffee buyer and majority owner, shipping out Little Waves Coffee to esteemed judges for Roaster of the Year.

**RIGHT** Mandy Spirito, putting their heart into each roast.

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