

2023
ROASTER
of the YEAR
 MICRO CATEGORY

RABBIT HOLE ROASTERS

Montreal, Quebec, Canada



By Emily Puro

TYPICALLY, A MISSION STATEMENT IS just that—a statement that declares a company’s purpose and how it will serve its customers. But Rabbit Hole Roasters, *Roast’s* 2023 Micro Roaster of the Year, is anything but typical. Instead, the Montreal-based company’s mission consists of two questions that guide its strategy and operations: “Why do we deserve to take up space in this industry?” and “How can we occupy that space in a meaningful way?”

As co-founder David Lalonde puts it, “If we take that space, maybe it means someone else can’t take it, so are we worthy of the work we are doing?”

DOING COFFEE DIFFERENTLY

Before opening Rabbit Hole with co-founder Sophie Moreau in 2018, Lalonde worked for a few other roasters, helping develop their green coffee programs. In 2016, he and fellow entrepreneur Chris Capell opened the Montreal Coffee Academy, teaching amateur baristas how to brew coffee at home. Moreau, who at the time was thinking of opening a cafe, met Lalonde when she took a class at the academy. When they realized their values and vision for what a coffee company could look like aligned, they teamed up to open Rabbit Hole.

When he was working for other roasters, Lalonde recalls, “there were a lot of limitations, because I had to work within what they wanted to do. I had a lot of ideas, and I wanted to buy coffee a little bit differently and focus on different origins, but also on relationship coffee as opposed to let’s just find the tastiest coffee you can find every year and switch origins, switch farmers.”

“We were talking about building something authentic,” says Moreau, “to have our own business and to do our own branding. That’s my creative side that I really wanted to explore as well. So, by

doing something focused on emerging origins and on relationships, ... we could really offer something that we thought was needed in the industry, or at least how we wanted to experience coffee.”



Sophie Moreau and David Lalonde, co-owners and founders of Rabbit Hole Roasters, laugh and talk about coffee. *Photo by Charles Procee*

THE WINNER’S STATS

ROASTING OUTPUT 25,000 pounds (projected for 2022)

ESTABLISHED 2018

LOCATION Montreal, Quebec, Canada

EMPLOYEES Three (including the owners)

LEADERSHIP Sophie Moreau and David Lalonde, co-owners and founders

RETAIL LOCATIONS Zero

WEBSITE rabbitholeroasters.com

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Sophie Moreau and David Lalonde, co-owners and founders of Rabbit Hole Roasters. *Photo by Charles Procee*



Production roaster
Marielle Fournier
roasting coffee.
Photo by Sophie Moreau

Over the past four years, Moreau and Lalonde have poured their energy into the deep and meaningful work of building strong relationships—with farmers, importers, wholesale partners, and even with online customers and the global coffee community through a robust social media presence. Part of that work is focused on shining light on inequities in the coffee supply chain and beyond, highlighting the often-hidden details of coffee economics, and trying to open the world of specialty coffee to a wider range of consumers.

“We wanted to create something that’s approachable to all and felt welcoming, and to translate information and help educate people on different topics,” Moreau says.

As an example, the product page for every coffee on the company’s website includes a kind of “transparency report,” with detailed information about the costs incurred throughout the coffee’s journey from seed to cup. And that doesn’t just mean the farm-gate price and importer’s fees. For every coffee Rabbit Hole sells, Moreau finds as much detail as she can on the costs related to production, processing, transportation, storage, roasting, packaging and beyond.

“It’s not information that’s privy to everyone,” she says. “It’s not privy to us. We have to dig to find that information down that rabbit hole, but once we learn it, we want to bring it forward.”

Moreau and Lalonde have chosen not to open any retail cafes, believing they can have a greater impact by focusing on work that reaches a broader audience. But in a “best of both worlds” happy coincidence, the company shares a building in Delson, a small suburb of Montreal, with a cafe whose owner is also committed to “bringing down barriers and having coffee be more social,” as Moreau puts it. Curious coffee drinkers and their children can watch the coffee being roasted in the back, and often get impromptu lessons in green coffee and how it’s roasted.

And although Rabbit Hole is still small—with a projected output of about 25,000 pounds in 2022—its reach has grown to a global scale. To date, the company has shipped coffee to more than 36 countries.

DEFINING “RELATIONSHIP” COFFEE

Initially, Lalonde and Moreau decided to focus on emerging origins as a way to differentiate their brand while helping farmers in lesser-known origins gain access to international markets. Their focus soon expanded when, as Lalonde explains, “The more we went into emerging origins, the more we learned that what’s needed are relationships with the producers.”

They took the time to discover what farmers really need to produce great coffee while earning a livable income, which has led Rabbit Hole to purchase the vast majority of its coffee in advance, providing farmers with the security of a committed buyer before the coffee leaves origin, and in most cases, before it’s harvested. Working with the Montreal-based import company Semilla, which focuses on helping small producers gain access to and recognition in the North American market, Rabbit Hole has partnered with a number of farmers who are new to specialty. In 2021, for example, the company purchased 14 bags of coffee from farmer Luis Roldan of the Indigenous Xinka nation in Guatemala. It was his entire harvest of specialty coffee, and his first international sale.

“This year, he grew to 21 bags because he knew we would buy it,” says Lalonde, adding that Rabbit Hole’s commitment not only allowed Roldan to increase the percentage of his harvest dedicated to specialty rather than commodity coffee, it also allowed him to separate his two varieties into different lots.

Rabbit Hole is also proud to partner with coffee farmers in the emerging origin of Yunnan, China. It took time and effort to develop a trusting relationship with the Guiben producing group in Yunnan, given the distance and language barrier, but the relationship has already paid significant returns on both sides. Rabbit Hole has not only helped provide access to North American and other international markets for Yunnan coffee, which has proven hugely popular with its customers, it also raised funds for the Guiben group, which the farmers used to build raised drying beds.

But strong relationships involve give and take, and when in-country prices soared in China during covid-19, a Guiben producer named TianCai demonstrated how much he values the relationship with Rabbit Hole. “TianCai reserved the coffee for us and we agreed on a price estimate before the harvest,” explains Lalonde. “Then prices soared internally during the harvest because output was lower.” Instead of breaking their agreement and selling to another buyer at a significantly higher price during that atypical season, TianCai chose to maintain his focus on expanding internationally and building the relationship with Rabbit Hole, knowing that prices will fluctuate from year to year, but a strong relationship with an international buyer remains constant.

“We offered to pay the higher price to meet the in-country price,” says Lalonde, “but he said, ‘No, let’s keep it stable.’”

In addition to committing to purchases in advance, Rabbit Hole is committed to paying well above the standard FOB (“free on board”) export price for all of its coffee. Using the Specialty Coffee Transaction Guide as a benchmark, the company reports, “The median coffee price in 2019 was FOB \$2.60 per pound, and we had an average closer to FOB \$3.85 per pound. For 2020–21, the median contracts were at \$2.85 per pound industrywide, and ours were at an average of

just above \$5 per pound.”

“This is not just us waving numbers around for no reason,” Lalonde says. “We are a profitable company, and this shows that paying more for coffee is not only necessary for sustainability at origin, but possible as well. Sharing financial resources more equally is crucial along the chain. You can make a profit and be responsible to your business partners and the environment.”



Moreau and Lalonde on
production day. Photo by
Charles Procee

BEYOND COFFEE

“There are plenty of roasters doing good things in coffee,” says Lalonde. “We’re not the only ones who are trying to change things, but for us, it needs to come full circle.” That means working to end inequities at origin, and also working to end inequities closer to home.

Take Rabbit Hole’s relationship with Café Colis Resistencia in Mataquescuintla, Guatemala, a group of Indigenous farmers who have banded together to fight the illegal exploitation of their sacred land by a Canadian mining company. (Luis Roldan is a member of the coalition.) “By buying their coffees, we empower them to hire legal aid, hire security guards,”



Lalonde and Moreau in full production. Photo by Charles Procee

says Lalonde. “It’s money so they can get away from their farms to protest or go to court and make sure their land is not being swept from under their feet by this big corporation.”

Coming full circle, in this case, means Rabbit Hole also supports Indigenous groups fighting the destruction of their lands in North America, like the Wet’suwet’en people in British Columbia fighting against pipeline construction that threatens their sacred waterhead.

“It’s the same fight,” says Lalonde. “We can’t just be righteous when it benefits us, because that’s just cheap marketing. It needs to be holistic, and if we advocate for a group of people, we advocate for that group of people worldwide.” Rabbit Hole’s advocacy for the Wet’suwet’en people takes several forms, from increasing awareness of the fight on social media to donating the proceeds from its first “anti-Black-Friday” sale to help land defenders post bail after being arrested for protesting.

“We could find the same quality of coffee for 30 percent less,” Lalonde says of the Café Colis Resistencia partnership, “but that’s not the point. That coffee is a means to go beyond the beverage.”

Rabbit Hole also supports its local community through fundraising campaigns, and tries to amplify the voices of people who traditionally have been silenced or invisible in the coffee world and beyond. As just one example, the company recently partnered with Cxffeeblack, a Black-owned coffee company

in Memphis, to raise money and awareness for its “Cxffeeblack to Africa” trip and documentary.

This focus on inequities is sometimes seen as controversial, and the company has received backlash for its online posts and articles on topics such as Israeli persecution of Palestinians, the scourge of online “coffee influencers,” fair pay for baristas and more. But that hasn’t stopped Lalonde and Moreau from speaking out on topics they feel strongly about.

“We are here to share our platforms for those who could use one,” says Lalonde. “We are a white-owned, privileged company, and we want to use our privilege to let others speak.”

Lalonde and Moreau are also committed to supporting their staff. Before accepting a job with Rabbit Hole in May 2022, production roaster Marielle Fournier—currently the company’s sole employee—asked if Lalonde and Moreau would consider allowing her to use Rabbit Hole’s bean storage space and roaster for her own sourcing and roasting venture, Dead Simple Coffee. “They said, ‘Yeah, of course. We want you ... to roast here and be part of everything,’” Fournier recalls.

“We give her free storage and free use of the machine after hours,” says Moreau. “Some might view this as competition, but we view this as collaboration. On the plus side, everything she learns on her own will indirectly benefit us as well. ... And her coffee is ridiculously tasty.”

DIGGING DEEP ON SUSTAINABILITY

Rabbit Hole views sustainability as a three-pillar model—economic, environmental and social. “We try to maximize our impact on all three pillars,” says Lalonde. “By the way things are going, we won’t have quality arabica in 50 years if we don’t tackle all three aspects of the sustainability puzzle.”

While we’ve already covered many of the economic and social aspects of the company’s work, what about the environment? For starters, Rabbit Hole uses a 7-kilo Loring roaster, which has a relatively low carbon footprint. Packaging materials have also been a priority.

“In a world plagued with green washing, it’s hard to know what’s what,” says Moreau. “We refuse to simply accept that it’s 100-percent compostable without investigating, even if compostable sounds amazing to the consumer.”

When selecting new bags, Moreau and Lalonde asked a friend—a scientist who specializes in water management—to help them assess the sustainability of compostable bags from three different companies. “Not only were those materials very intensive to make,” says Moreau, “they can only be put in industrial compost and will likely create microplastics that will be particularly damaging for underground water sources.” Instead, the company switched from #7 recyclable bags to a #2, among the most easily recyclable plastics in North America.

Previously, when Rabbit Hole began using 100-percent home compostable mailers made from cornstarch for online orders, it received enthusiastic feedback from customers. But when Moreau and Lalonde learned the cornstarch-based material had negative environmental impacts, they dove back into research mode and found new mailers made completely from ocean-bound plastic pollution.

“It’s not about saying what sounds right to sell more coffee,” says Moreau. “It’s about using what we know to make informed decisions that can help reduce our impact as much as possible. If you keep digging, down the rabbit hole, it’s often not what it seems.”

ROASTING COFFEE THAT STANDS OUT

Clearly, Rabbit Hole is a company focused on doing good in the world, but what about its coffee?

“People tell us our coffees are very recognizable, especially because of how round and sweet our roasts are,” says Lalonde, adding that the company roasts much faster than the typical specialty coffee company. “While most roasters will roast in 10 to 11 minutes for a normal medium roast and more for dark roasts,” he explains, “our light and medium roasts are done on average in 7:45 minutes, and our dark roasts in about 8:30 minutes.” This method has led to a number of desirable outcomes, he adds, including coffee that ages



well; sweeter, more-floral, less-bitter dark roasts; and a wider range of brew ratios for the same coffees.

“Conventionally, you would allow for more development time,” says Fournier, “so you would stretch out the roast to make sure it’s sweet and acidic but balanced, but David found a way with the Loring to achieve that in a shorter timeframe, and I find that it makes the coffees even juicier and even sweeter, and it brings out more of their natural flavor.”

A lot of specialty roasters don’t offer dark roasts, she adds, but for Rabbit Hole, it’s about “making sure dark roasts are not neglected like they normally are, where you get those blackened, charred beans. We make sure they’re still full of sweetness and still juicy, which is quite hard to find in a dark roast.”

Rabbit Hole has also experimented with specialty robusta. Fournier describes the beans as similar to peaberries, smaller and denser than most specialty arabica. To account for that, she says, “we start at a relatively high temperature to make sure we have enough heat in the machine so it roasts the whole way through, so it’s not still undeveloped on the inside.”

The company sources its robusta from Hacienda Legrand in Ecuador, whose entire harvest is specialty robusta. “The first year was more like curiosity for people, but the second year, people bought more of it,” says Lalonde. “It has a lot of caffeine and a very interesting taste.” The coffee scored above 80 using an arabica scoring sheet in an in-house cupping, which was surprising and also encouraging.

“It’s important to expand our horizons of what coffee can be,” Lalonde says, pointing to the forecasted decrease in arabica caused by climate change. “Robusta

Rabbit Hole Roasters recently changed its logo from a “big flashy white rabbit to a more sober, origami-style rabbit,” says co-founder Sophie Moreau. “The origami logo is a reminder that we can shape our company any way we see fit, and that we can change direction when needed.”



LEFT Lalonde loading a batch of coffee. Photo by Charles Procee



MIDDLE Lalonde and Moreau talking around the roaster. Photo by Charles Procee



RIGHT Moreau celebrates another roast. Photo by Charles Procee

is high yield. It's disease resistant. If we invest now, maybe we'll have 85-scoring robusta 10 years in the future. ... I feel like there's so much potential."

STAYING TRUE TO THEIR VALUES

In everything they do, Moreau and Lalonde consider authenticity the key.

"We feel it's important to give people the full version of who we are authentically," says Lalonde, referring to the company's social media presence and the backlash he and Moreau have received online. "I've been accused of being pessimistic about what's going badly in the industry, but the only reason I bring these things up is that I want to talk about solutions. I'm a coffee roaster, so I think the solution is going to be x, y and z. But a farmer is going to have different solutions. A cafe owner's going to have different solutions. A home barista is going to have different solutions. I just want to put things out there so we can respectfully have conversations."

"They're some of the most genuinely authentic people I have ever met in specialty," says Fournier. "So much of the coffee scene, especially in Montreal, is full of the same kind of person. There's a lot of ego, which is not what I expected to find, and a lot of very competitive spirit. ... Working with Rabbit Hole is the first time I realized that coffee could be something really positive in Montreal."

That focus on authenticity and values drives Rabbit Hole's wholesale program as well. "It's really not a numbers game for us," says Lalonde. "It's finding cafes that, maybe they don't have 100 percent of

our vision, but they share our core values." He and Moreau have turned down large wholesale accounts because the owners' visions didn't mesh with their own, refusing to work with companies that don't demonstrate a genuine commitment to farmers, relationships, equity and sustainability. "We're also mindful of the relationships we have," says Lalonde, noting that the company honors the exclusivity of its wholesale partners in smaller cities such as Winnipeg, turning down other wholesale accounts there.

"Even in Montreal, we're not in many cafes, and a lot of people are surprised about that," says Moreau. "When we have a good partner who we have a really good relationship with, we can both grow our businesses. The same thing we're doing with our green buying we're doing with our wholesale partners here. We want to be mindful of them and their competition."

"We are not looking to have crazy fast growth," Moreau adds. "We want it to be organic, with a real following and fan base, and we feel like we achieved that so far. Following trends can only get you so far. We are in it for the long haul, so authenticity is key."

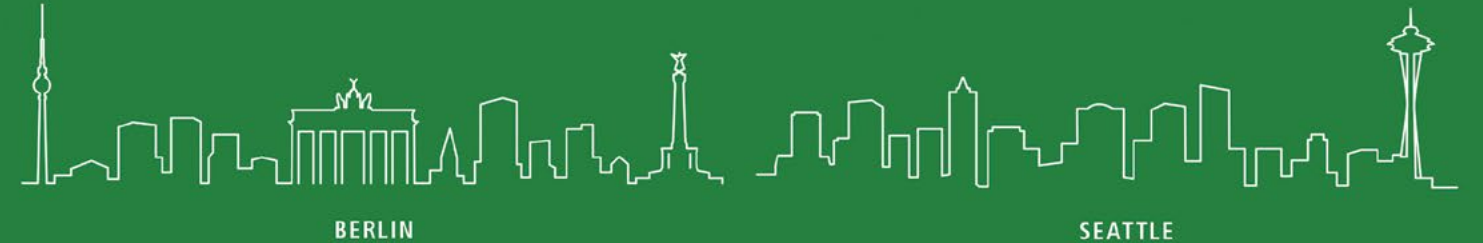


EMILY PURO is a freelance writer and editor living in Portland, Oregon. In addition to Roast, her articles and essays have appeared in Writer's Digest, Better Homes and Gardens, Portland Monthly, The Oregonian and numerous other publications. She enjoys learning about the art and science of coffee, as well as the social and environmental impacts of the industry, and she continues to be amazed by those devoting their lives to this work.



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Worldwide presence.

Sourcing coffee locally, distributing globally since 1996.

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