

# Micro Roaster of the YEAR

## Mudhouse Coffee Roasters



**MUDHOUSE COFFEE'S ROASTER AND RETAIL CREWS** Seated (from left) are Nick Cardoni, Pinky Swiderski and Jennifer Tidwell; standing (from left) are Eric Stone, Phil Hobbes, Lynelle Lawrence, John Lawrence, Whitney Phaup and George Patterson. | Photo by Jack Looney

BY  
HOWARD  
BRYMAN

Sometimes a strong wind can muddy the waters, and sometimes it clears the way forward.

For Mudhouse Coffee Roasters in Charlottesville, Virginia, it's more often been the latter.

When a devastating derecho—a fast-moving band of thunderstorms coupled with destructive winds—plowed through the eastern United States in June 2012, power outages were reported from New Jersey to the Midwest. Lives were lost, homes and businesses were damaged, and in Virginia alone more than 60,000 people were left in the dark. Yet even as Virginia Gov. Bob McDonnell declared a state of emergency after the storm, the staff of the Mudhouse Coffee cafe in Crozet, Virginia, headed to work. They knew that as rattled and distressed as folks might have been at that moment, they would, perhaps more than ever, need and appreciate a fresh cup of coffee and a place to gather with their neighbors.

"It didn't even occur to me to not be open," says Nick Cardoni, now director of retail operations for the company.

At the time, Cardoni was manager of the Crozet location. He got up early in those days to account for his commute from Charlottesville to Crozet, and when he checked his phone that morning in 2012, he saw text messages from the company's baker saying there was no power. His response? He asked her to put some massive kettles of water on the gas stove to prepare for a day of brewing coffee off the grid.

Cardoni didn't even think to call the company's owners, John and Lynelle Lawrence, to seek instruction. Staffed entirely by a creative and colorful crew of people with sound judgment, sharp skills and self-confidence, the Mudhouse culture is focused on autonomy and self-direction rather than hierarchy or micromanagement.

Besides, Cardoni didn't have time to confer with the Lawrences. When he discovered a downed tree blocking his driveway, he had to hurry to call another Mudhouse employee to catch a ride. Then he had to run up a hill and hop a fence to reach his co-worker's car before the two headed to work together.

Everyone scheduled to work at the cafe that day reported for duty as usual. They pulled every hand-grinder off the merchandise shelves and cranked away, keeping the French press and pour-overs flowing. Word spread around town that the shop was open, and they had lines out the door for hours at a time, garnering attention from local news media.



Mudhouse co-founder Lynelle Lawrence cups coffee with production manager Phil Hobbes. Photo by Jack Looney

### THE WINNER'S STATS

ESTABLISHED 1993

LOCATION Charlottesville, Virginia

EMPLOYEES 41

LEADERSHIP Co-founders Lynelle and John Lawrence

RETAIL LOCATIONS 4

ROASTERS (MACHINES) 15-kilo Giesen W-15 and 1-pound San Franciscan SF-1

ROASTING OUTPUT About 60,000 pounds per year

WEBSITE [mudhouse.com](http://mudhouse.com)



More than a dozen Mudhouse employees have tattoos of the company's logo, a griffin. | Photo by Nick Cardoni

CONTINUED ON PAGE 24 ▶

“Everybody was without power, and they just needed to get out of the house and get some coffee. They were so into it,” Cardoni recalls of the response. “We actually had customers at times grinding their own coffee, handing it back to us and we’d brew it for them, and we just made it through the day.”

The scene Cardoni describes was stressful, sure, but also fun. “This was everybody kind of pulling together,” he says, “literally transcending that line between the counter and the people behind the counter. It was a really cool moment. We always hope that’s our reputation—that we’ll be open, just being a member of this community, really trying to be plugged in and being as supportive as possible. Those are values that we’ve held to pretty closely.”

## How It All Began

Twenty years earlier, in 1992, John Lawrence was spending the summer working as a land surveyor in Alaska, while his lifelong friend Lynelle was hitchhiking around the western United States on a post-college walkabout. They had fallen into chatting on the phone every Thursday night, and John was urging Lynelle to head to Alaska, find some work and hang out. She resisted.

Though she didn’t have any concrete plans, she fancied herself something of a loner when she traveled. She also had recently ended a complicated relationship and strongly preferred to remain free from any potential entanglements. So despite—or perhaps because of—the doe-eyed childhood crushes that had come and gone between them years before, Lynelle was by no means compelled to visit her friend in Alaska at that moment.

Still, in fairness to her longtime friend, she decided to let the I Ching, the ancient Chinese book of divination, decide. She tossed her three coins into the breeze, and they told her to keep traveling northwest.

It was while camping in Alaska that summer that Lynelle and John hatched the idea of starting a coffee shop in the eclectic mountainside haven of Charlottesville, Virginia, about 160 miles northwest of Norfolk, where they grew up.

“It’s a beautiful town of harmony,” says Lynelle. “You have tons of attorneys and tons of goth kids, tons of skate punks. All these wild and different types of people, and they don’t just coexist, they all get along.”

“It’s also got a lot of that ‘live and let live’ West Coast vibe, and really similar demographics to Santa Cruz, so we had a feeling that a coffeehouse would work here and stand up to competition,” says John, who found inspiration in the roasting style and variety of cafes he discovered while attending the University of California, Santa Cruz.

John and Lynelle founded Mudhouse Coffee in 1993 with a farmers market stand and a small sidewalk cart at the east end of the pedestrian mall in downtown Charlottesville.

“We started with a cart to get our feet wet, make a bunch of mistakes, and start to build up a clientele,” John explains. It also allowed the couple to scope out other businesses as they pushed the cart up and down the mall every day, considering all the angles and building up a rock-solid business plan.

One year later, they were married, and a year after that, in 1995, the 1,200-square-foot flagship Mudhouse Coffee cafe opened for



LEFT Lynelle Lawrence and Willem Boot planting geisha trees at their new farm, Finca La Cabra, in Panama. | Photo by John Lawrence RIGHT (From left) John Lawrence, Lynelle Lawrence, Catherine Cadloni and Willem Boot at Finca La Cabra. | Photo by Leonardo Aguirres

business in downtown Charlottesville, where it still thrives today. Right off the bat, John, Lynelle and one employee kept the place open from 6 a.m. to midnight, six days a week—because a community never closes.

## Community at the Core

“The idea was, if somebody wants to stand on a table and play guitar—yes. If somebody wants to streak through—yes. We had art. We had music. All that was yes, and my answer was yes to charitable donations too, because that’s what a community space is,” says Lynelle. “It’s community driven, and it doesn’t work if people don’t feel like they’re in some way a piece of it. It belongs to everyone. We’re the keepers of making sure the door stays open, but the space belongs to the community.”

The fledging company had to balance fiscal security with charitable giving, so Lynelle and John began by donating air pots of brewed coffee and bags of beans. They donated their time and hosted events in the company’s space, too.

“I say this humbly, because I feel it’s truly an honor to be asked to do this,” says Lynelle, “... but I know we donate [frequently], once every three days, something’s going out the door to somebody.”

As the enterprise expanded, so did the Lawrences’ ability to serve the community.

“Now that we have all these stores, we can leverage that for other groups and nonprofits around here,” says John. “We can help them with awareness campaigns, and because we’re a small business, we have to be resourceful.”

Beyond donating space and retail goods, Mudhouse started training and empowering staff to run brew stations, pour-over pop-ups and the company’s nitro coffee tricycle at PTA meetings, the fire station, and various fundraisers and community celebrations.

Serving the community also means maintaining sustainable business practices, something that has been central to the company’s vision since its inception.

“We build on it each year by analyzing the inputs, outputs and systems of each section of our company,” says Phil Hobbes, Mudhouse’s production manager. “At each turn, we ask ourselves the mantra question, ‘What else can we do here?’”



CONTINUED ON PAGE 26 ►



**LEFT** "It's a process," says Lynelle Lawrence of building a successful business with her husband, John. "It's not about landing somewhere. It's about the journey."  
**RIGHT** Head roaster Eric Stone and owner Lynelle Lawrence inspect a roast.  
 Photos by Jack Looney

In addition to installing LED lights in all of its stores, using reclaimed lumber to remodel its flagship cafe and upgrading its HVAC systems to be more energy efficient, Mudhouse has made a number of more extensive and innovative investments.

"We installed a heat sink device in our bakery that captures the heat from the ovens and recycles it to reduce the energy needed to heat our water, while cooling the room and eliminating the need for air conditioning," says Hobbes.

Rather than selling bottled water, Mudhouse cafes provide filtered water for reusable containers. The company has used biodegradable cold cups for more than a decade, and has composted all of its coffee grounds since opening its first cafe in 1993. It also composts chaff, donates jute bags to be used as weed covers in a local community garden, and reuses all of its GrainPro bags.

"As a result of these efforts," says Hobbes, "our business was one of the first in our area to receive LEAP (Local Energy Alliance Program) certification."

### Let the Roasting Begin!

In the early days, in keeping with John's infatuation with West Coast coffee culture, Mudhouse served coffee roasted by Lexington Coffee Roasters, a company founded by Terry and Melissa Scholl, who relocated from Santa Cruz, California, to Lexington, Virginia, after the Loma Prieta earthquake of 1989.

"We learned so much from them about brewing coffee and about sustainability," says John. "They're giants in our eyes."

In 2012—the year of the derecho and Mudhouse's 19th year in operation—the company brought its coffee sourcing and roasting in-house, ushering in a new era for the business and expanding opportunities to give back.

"We'd create a blend, and we would donate a portion of the proceeds to a different charitable organization," says John.

Recipients of the company's fundraising blends have varied widely, from Tibetan monks working to help the poor in India to the Crozet Library, a local music resource center and more. Yet if there's any other

vein of the business as strong as its sense of community, Mudhouse Coffee Roasters' commitment to quality and the keen senses of its roasters might be it.

Prior to going commercial with a 15-kilo Giesen, the Lawrences did their best to hone their bean-browning chops on their back porch with small bags of green coffee purchased online, a San Franciscan SF-1 roaster, and training from California-based Boot Coffee. They turned out to be quick learners. Within two years of bringing the Giesen online, Mudhouse was included in a "top 10" roundup of American coffee shops published by *USA Today*, and both Lynelle and John had become Q graders.

"The thing that got me into wanting to do it was to be able to calibrate with the Q grader in Yemen, and the person in Ethiopia maybe," says Lynelle, "to be able to help the farmers get a fair evaluation of what they're doing, and maybe even help them get better at doing it, so the specialty coffee industry continues to grow."

"The Q coffee system is a key platform for producers who need that informed, calibrated feedback," agrees John. "We wanted to push ourselves, and we feel like cupping skills are foundational skills for specialty coffee, whether you're a producer, an importer, a roaster, or running a cafe. Being calibrated with people around the country and around the world is key to promoting and helping bring along specialty coffee."

Mudhouse's two roasting machines are linked with Cropster. The company uses a ColorTrack laser color analyzer as well as moisture and density analysis equipment, and the Lawrences and their staff are always on the lookout for additional technological innovations that will foster improved quality and consistency.

It pays off. Mudhouse head roaster Eric Stone placed third in the 2016 U.S. Roaster Championship, and the company won a 2016 Good Food Award for its treatment of a natural-process geisha grown on Willem Boot's farm, Finca La Mula, in Boquete, Panama.

It's been swift progress for such a young roastery, and though they may already seem to know their way around a geisha from Panama, they're poised to get to know it even better.

### Putting Down Roots at Origin

In September 2016, Mudhouse Coffee Roasters began planting on its own farm, Finca La Cabra, which covers 11 hectares and is just down the road from Boot's Finca La Mula in Boquete, Panama. Organized in partnership with Boot and Kelly Hartmann, of the Santa Clara, Panama, farm Finca Hartmann, Finca La Cabra is intended to be a paragon of sustainability and progress.

A nursery based on seeds sourced from a nearby national forest will provide seedlings for the farm's indigenous crop-shading reforestation, as well as other much-needed reforestation projects around Panama. An onsite mill will filter processing water responsibly before returning it to the nearby river. And while the first crop will be a somewhat rust-resistant geisha that can help mitigate the need for fungicides, the group also plans to plant two experimental variants for the purpose of genetic diversity.

It's not that the Lawrences assume they can grow better coffee than established coffee farmers. To the contrary, it's because they are

CONTINUED ON PAGE 28 ►



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aware of how much they don't know that they strive to learn more.

Inspired by the Zen Buddhist precept of "beginner's mind," Mudhouse strives in all its operations—be it sourcing, roasting, serving, finance or social responsibility—to humbly remember there's always more to know, and that learning is never-ending. John and Lynelle revere their forebears, and they carry with them pearls of wisdom they have gleaned in conversations with coffee industry veterans, so when Boot and Hartmann invited them to join in the Panama plantation venture, they couldn't refuse.

"We knew it was just a perfect and rare opportunity," says John. "If we didn't take that chance to work with them, we should just pack up and go home."

### Community Begins at Home

Between the company's four cafe locations, its wholesale program and its online retail operation, Mudhouse Coffee Roasters

currently roasts just shy of 60,000 pounds of coffee per year and employs more than 40 people. With John by her side, Lynelle has not consulted the I Ching in a long time. Instead, it's with careful planning, research and brainstorming that they make their moves today, looking inward at every pass to make sure each new project is one that will make them happy.

Making sure their employees are happy is equally important. The company supports staff members who are interested in pursuing careers in the coffee industry with resources, mentoring and a management training program, as well as salary increases for workers who pursue advanced coffee training and earn certifications. For employees who do not see coffee as a lifelong pursuit, Mudhouse offers flexible schedules to accommodate classes, hobbies and other pursuits.

Mudhouse Coffee Roasters has provided health insurance to all its employees, either fully paid or at an accessible rate, since the business began. It also regularly hosts staff



Head roaster Eric Stone (foreground) and production manager Phil Hobbes, deep in a cupping session. | Photo by Jack Looney

outings, from mid-winter parties to tubing down the James River.

"Anytime we can all gather to giggle is time well spent," says Hobbes.

The company's commitment to exceptional employment practices extends to its new farm as well.

"We are extremely happy to say that the operating budget for Finca La Cabra includes funds to pay our farm employees multiples above the national average for Panama, a true living wage, and the farm will include sustainable living quarters for those workers," says Hobbes.

Because much of the farm is situated on a plateau, he adds, working conditions will be less labor-intensive than on comparable high-elevation farms.

"As a result," Hobbes explains, "La Cabra will be able to depend much more on permanent employees who will be living at the farm and enjoying full-time employment," rather than temporary or seasonal workers.

"They bring such a beautiful combination of appreciating people for being people and being in touch with humanity, but then also being really good at running the business and improving the bottom line," says Cardoni of the Lawrences. "They've created this tribe where everybody shares these values of working hard but having a crazy amount of fun, flying the freak flag, and just being a loving, supportive, humble member of the community."

In fact, Lynelle recalls returning to Charlottesville after a brief time away to

discover 14 Mudhouse employees had gotten matching tattoos of the company's logo—a griffin.

"That's going to be forever," she marveled to one of the crew members.

"I'm part of a tribe," he replied. "This is important to me."

### Keeping It Fresh

Beyond expanding their knowledge and their ability to collaborate more deeply with producers, the Lawrences see in Finca La Cabra another way to bring their staff and their customers deeper into the fold.

"To be able to take that bean and walk it all the way down the chain, and hand it to them in a cup where we have mastered to the best of our ability every temperature and time and moment," says Lynelle, "it's just a whole other level of understanding coffee. It's just dreamy. Who gets to do that? How is this my life?"

John is equally thrilled about the constant freshness that comes with each new stage of development for a small but vertically integrated company.

"You have these whole sets of different challenges, but they're all within the same general field. That's so much more interesting to us than adding a bunch of stores and chasing zeroes," he says. "Even though we've been doing this for 23 years, we're still excited and fascinated by it. There's so much to learn, whether it's biologically, botanically, chemically, financially, socially. We wake up every day and jump out of bed to go to it."

HOWARD BRYMAN is a journalist who focuses on the specialty coffee industry. He currently serves as associate editor at [dailycoffeenews.com](http://dailycoffeenews.com). With experience as a barista, trainer, manager, roaster's apprentice, origin tourist and equipment tinkerer, Bryman relishes the opportunity to scrutinize coffee almost as much as he enjoys drinking it.

MACRO ROASTER OF THE YEAR ON PAGE 30

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