

2022
ROASTER
of the **YEAR**
 MACRO CATEGORY

HUCKLEBERRY ROASTERS



By Ever Meister

Photos courtesy of Huckleberry Roasters

SO MUCH ABOUT HUCKLEBERRY Roasters is a kind of gentle contradiction. The coffee is phenomenal, yet Huck considers itself a “people company.” In spite of roasting more than 240,000 pounds of coffee last year, maintaining national wholesale distribution and running two successful cafes in the greater Denver area, everyone on staff insists that it still feels like a small operation. The brand embodies Colorado’s laid-back, “hobbyist enthusiast” energy, yet here it is winning *Roast* magazine’s 2022 Macro Roaster of the Year.

Perhaps one of the most amazing contradictions within the culture of Huckleberry is the combination of self-deprecation and deep mutual admiration among the team. It is not unusual in a conversation with the company’s leadership to hear a chorus of, “No, *you* are awesome,” in rebuttal to “aw gee” statements, like how the first few years of the business were “horsing around mostly.”

“We’re the most self-conscious,” says Huckleberry co-owner Jason Farrar. “You’re just going to have to get used to it.”

The self-consciousness is part of the equation that has made Huck not only successful over this last decade, but also beloved. While the overall vision has stayed constant, so has a culture of self-reflection and evolution that enables the company, affectionately called Huck, to stay nimble, press forward and grow with and within its communities.

“It’s just been constant growth at Huckleberry, which has been kind of interesting,” says head roaster and 2019 U.S. Roaster Champion Shelby Williamson. “No matter what company I’ve ever been at, there’s always a period of stagnation where the company just is what it is. [At Huck] we haven’t had a period of stagnation since I started, and that seems pretty consistent with Huck’s story in general.”



Huck owners Koan Goedman and Jason Farrar are principally driven by a sense of building community and shared culture with people, rather than by profit.

THE WINNER’S STATS

ROASTING OUTPUT: 240,000 pounds

ESTABLISHED: 2011

LOCATION: Denver, Colorado

EMPLOYEES: 39

LEADERSHIP: Koan Goedman, founder/co-owner;
 Jason Farrar, co-owner

RETAIL LOCATIONS: Two

WEBSITE: huckleberryroasters.com

HOMEGROWN, BUT NOT HOMEBOUND

Koan Goedman and his opening business partner, Mark Mann, understood the unique connectivity of coffee and coffee shops first-hand. They met across the counter at a Denver specialty cafe where Goedman was a barista and Mann a customer asking what music was playing. When the two pals connected a couple of years later, they still shared an entrepreneurial spirit and started to think seriously about going into business together. It helped that they had an earnest belief that business should build a sense of collective culture and community through investment in people, and it did not hurt that they could tap into some of that magical sense of community that coffee seems to effortlessly foster.



ABOVE
Shelby Williamson, 2019 U.S. Roasting Champion and Huck's head roaster, proving that having fun and working hard don't have to be exclusive.

PRECEDING PAGE
The 4301 Pecos Cafe barista crew living out the HUCK mission to habituate kindness.

"I loved coffee, I loved coffee shops. I loved the connections, I loved the way that customers become regulars and then regulars become friends," Goedman reflects. The sense of community has shone through over and over during Huck's first decade, starting even before the doors were open.

Building out their earliest outpost was a scrappy endeavor, which of course seems only fitting. "We started a little roastery setup in my garage. My chicken coop was on the other side of the wall," Goedman laughs. "It was not a very legitimate operation."

While roasting was an exciting new endeavor for the pair, Goedman's dream was always to have a cafe. The first Huck location was in a heavily residential neighborhood, and right away the community became the focal point for Goedman and Mann. "As we were building the place out, our neighbors were super intrigued with what we were up to, and I think at that

point Huckleberry became a little bit more of a real thing. It really snowballed from there."

Now the company has two cafes in Denver and roasts more than 240,000 pounds of coffee annually on Probat and Giesen machines. Huck's community has grown not only locally but globally and includes a network of coworkers, customers, producers and friends far and wide whom Goedman and his team credit for making the company what it is.

One recent addition to the community is Farrar, whose previous company, Commonwealth Coffee Roasters, became part of the Huck family in 2019. From the outset, Goedman and Farrar were less competitors and more comrades.

"As small-business owners, Koan and I would commiserate on issues or help each other troubleshoot. We met every other month or so," Farrar says. "I think Denver has a unique coffee scene. In other cities it's really oddly competitive amongst the small businesses and there's not much comradery. I think that we all really tried not to have that kind of culture in Denver, and for the most part have done pretty OK with that."

In the late 2010s, both Goedman's and Farrar's original business partners left their respective companies and it wasn't long before the two friends began talking about joining forces as a duo. Farrar explains, "We had different skill sets as small business owners and what kind of things we're both good at. It just made a lot of operational sense, and we liked each other—I think!"

Liking each other is a big part of what makes Huck, Huck. The sense of community is as strong behind the counter and in the warehouse as it is in the cafes and sourcing relationships. Green-coffee buyer Kevin Nealon was the company's second employee, and now, seven years later, he says he has always felt taken care of, "which is something really nice and unfortunately a bit rare in this industry. It's always been in Koan's and now Jason's interest to take care of us, and as we grow, to do more and more of that, as much as possible."

Some of that sense of care and community feels very rooted in Huck's Coloradan culture, with its inherent love of working hard, playing harder—and,

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LEFT
Kevin Nealon, Huck's second employee, was a jack-of-all-trades in the early days and is currently the company's green buyer and director of coffee.



MIDDLE
Along with a Giesen W15, the pièce de résistance in the Huck roaster arsenal is a 1964 Probat UG22.



RIGHT
Owners Koan and Jason—taking fun seriously since 2011.

whenever possible, combining the two. This balanced outlook is one of the things that informs Huck's way of looking not only at branding itself as approachable, but also at being a company where everybody involved can live the best version of their own life.

"Colorado in general is very good at taking fun very seriously, and taking your hobbies very seriously," Williamson says. "That's something I really love about Huck—taking fun very seriously, then transplanting that into a business. Coffee for a lot of people is a hobby, something they do outside of work, and all of us have taken that and internalized it into a career."

Nealon agrees. "Huckleberry has always and will always feel homegrown to people here in Colorado and in Denver," he says, "but I don't think that homegrown quality has historically seemed to be exclusively homegrown or local. I think we will continue to feel more and more open as we grow as a company."

A PEOPLE COMPANY

No one who has tasted Huck's products would ever doubt that it is a capital-C Coffee company, with big dreams, big quality and a strategic sourcing plan that keeps quality on the up and up. However, both Goodman and Farrar agree that while coffee is amazing, it is also simply a tool that can be used to build something bigger, something perhaps less tangible and finite.

"For me it's not coffee, it's people," says Goodman.

"One thing that I've learned a lot—and I'm learning a lot from Jason—is that it's really about people and relationships. What's important are the people we meet, the people we work with, and the people we do business with that we support financially."

Farrar feels the same way. "Ultimately, coffee is super fantastic, and it's captured my attention for as long as I've been in this work, but coffee's not actually going to solve any problems like people do. Value-wise for Koan and I, we view the company as a means to elevate people's lives financially and in their well-being," he says. "If you were an accountant looking at our books, you'd freak out a little bit every year, like, 'You guys are doing great, but you give all your money away.'" Farrar and his team laugh together before he continues. "That's what the business is for. It's not a gimmick. We want to make sure that the people we work with are taken care of the best that we can."

Of course, there's no getting around the fact that Huckleberry Roasters earned the title of Roaster of the Year in large part because of the quality of the coffee, which is one of the many reasons it is a good thing they have Nealon and Williamson onboard.

"I still like the coffee," says Nealon. "I have a tinkering mindset, so the process of really nailing a coffee and figuring out how to make it shine is still super satisfying to me. And then also the process of discovery, just tasting things that I didn't expect. As we grow, getting the chance to taste more and more things that I didn't expect is still really exciting. At the

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base of that, what keeps me excited is certainly the people, too, but the coffee part is still really good for me.”

“I agree with Kevin,” Williamson says. “I’m still very interested in the puzzle of how to make coffee taste good. It’s fun to argue over cup scores, and it’s fun to see when we have the same notes on coffees or say, ‘Oh, I didn’t taste that at all.’ Kevin and I like to argue, and we have different taste in coffee, so it’s like, ‘Yeah, I bet that one’s your favorite—I hate that one!’”

The connective thread that runs through the coffee vision and the people vision behind Huck is an intentional approachability, specifically created, Goedman says, by constantly asking, “Who do we want to drink our coffee?” At the time that he and Mann began dreaming about Huckleberry, Denver was still trying to find its specialty coffee footing.

“There was a lot of specialty beer, but not all that much in coffee yet. The specialty coffee world in Denver was just peanuts for the amount of people who drank coffee,” Goedman says. He and his team decided to eschew the image of the “snobby

barista” and instead focus on an open-arms business philosophy that aimed to have something for everyone. “How do we make approachable coffee lineups, approachable cafe experiences that are very much specialty—we take the product we roast, brew, craft, etc., very seriously—but how do we present that in a way that is approachable, friendly? ‘Where are you on your coffee journey? I’ll meet you.’ That’s I think something that I’ve had from the beginning and I think we still very much anchor.”

DEPENDABLE PARTNERS

Meeting someone along the way on their coffee journey is also part of what anchors the green coffee department’s sourcing philosophy and informs the company’s mission to build and grow mutually beneficial long-term relationships.

“It’s important for me in our sourcing to be dependable partners to the people that we work with at origin,” says Nealon. “There will always be times where we are seeking out the best

of the best from a country and finding space for that one banger coffee, but the foundation of what we do is to be dependable partners to the people that we buy from, try to buy from the same producers or producer groups year after year, prioritizing growing relationships first and foremost before adding new relationships for buying purposes.”

Nealon explains that for Huck, dependability in both directions is what makes a strong supply stream, and that strength can only happen when the dependability is there, making it a self-fulfilling prophecy of sorts. By reliably buying the solid coffees at the lower-but-still-good end of the quality spectrum—what many of us would call the “84s, occasional 83s of the specialty world”—Nealon and the Huck team are able to also take risks on those same producers’ more experimental and higher-end coffees, as well as help support those growers in making investments that will hopefully raise their overall quality over time.

“If they’re going to be putting in the effort to work with us and separate out the banger coffees, the 84 coffees need to be



Huck’s downtown Denver cafe, located in the Dairy Block, is a place for locals, global travelers, baseball fans and business people to gather over cups of coffee and share stories.

rewarded for just putting in the initial effort. And then, beyond those attainable coffees, building in some incentive structures and quality premiums that can really reward a farmer for a great year as well, or trying something new,” Nealon adds. “Whether we’re building these incentive structures ourselves or working with sourcing partners who already work in a similar fashion, our best coffees get better because we’re building from the base and encouraging more farmers from each group to try to produce those higher-point coffees. Those coffees keep on getting better

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Odalis, a barista at Dairy Block, is key to Huck's goal of approachable luxury—making people happy with yummy drinks and welcoming everyone who comes to visit.

while we can also increase what we do on the base level.”

The strategy also works well for head roaster Williamson and her team, as they are able to interact with and study coffees from the same partners and the same places year after year, witnessing their change and evolution—another piece of coffee’s marvelous puzzle. “That’s one of my favorite things,” she says. “A coffee will cycle back around, and you get to see how it tastes this year, how does it compare to last year.”

“WE HAVE A LOT LESS TO LOSE THAN WE THINK WE DO.”

While it might seem counterintuitive to a small business owner, Goedman says that one of the greatest lessons he has learned more recently in his 10-plus years at Huckleberry is that “we have a lot less to lose than we think we do.” What he means is that moving through business with less fear, with more boldness and with a strong and rooted sense of self can be more valuable than going with a current in an attempt to minimize risk—which can lead to stagnation..

“That’s true from a branding perspective, and that’s true for deciding to put out a dark roast. What we’re doing is not that precious, and I think if we’re willing to take some risks and willing to take some missteps and learn from those things, the end result of that is a stronger company, stronger relationships with all the people that we’re doing this work with, and a stronger business,” he says.

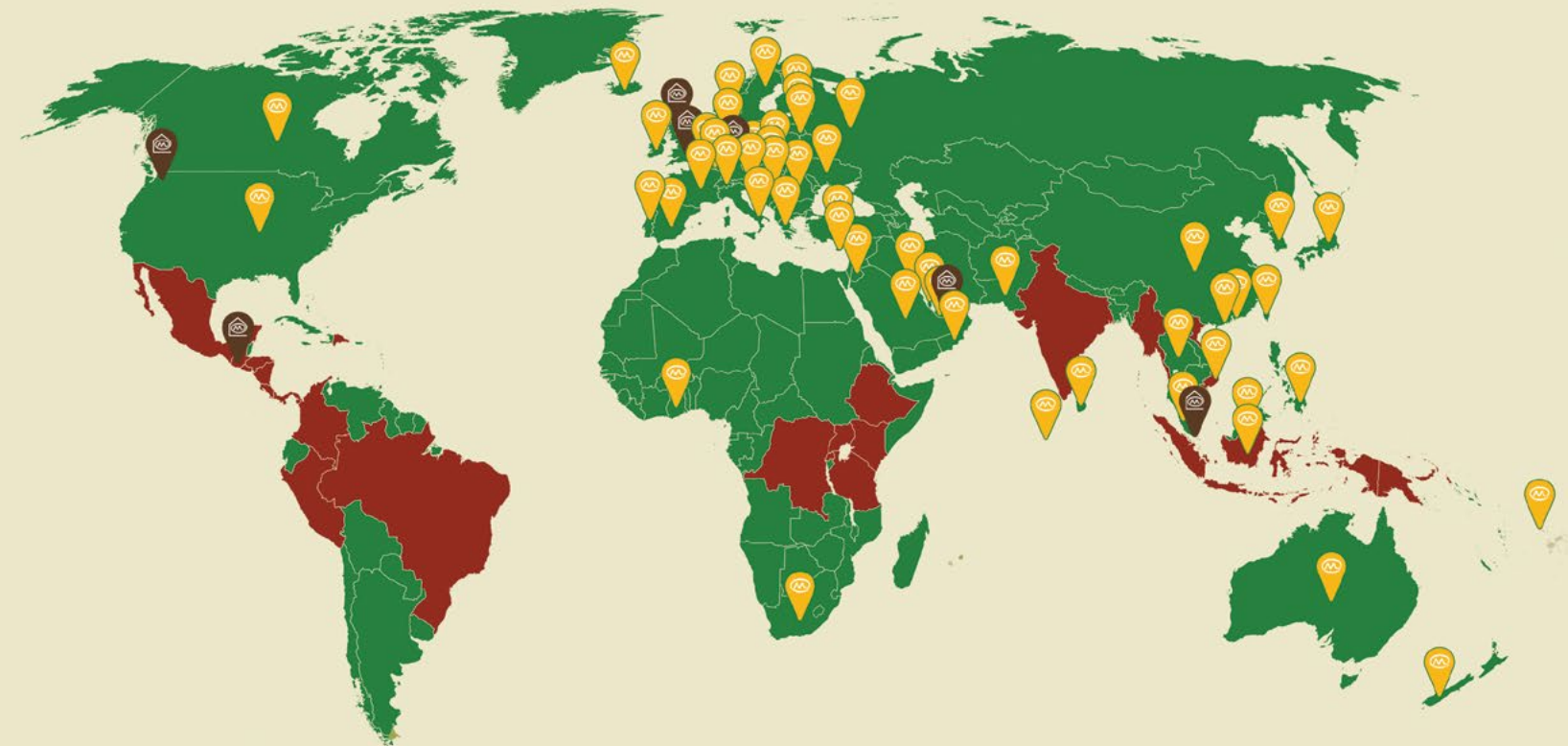
“There have been times where I have felt like we

have a lot to lose, and we do have a lot to lose: There are loans we’re responsible for, my house is on the line, that kind of stuff,” he explains. “It’s also true for smaller operations of the business that we don’t have that much to lose and it’s worth taking an unnatural step or do something that feels a little riskier, because for the most part, the people who support us emotionally and financially are very forgiving. Not only are they willing, they’re wanting to go on this journey with us. Sometimes we’re going to miss, and sometimes we’re going to do something that just clunks, whether it’s something like a specialty drink doesn’t sell or a coffee doesn’t sell. When it goes right, though, the reward is really powerful.”

Farrar agrees wholeheartedly. “Nothing is sacred for us. This is an extreme hyperbole, but if we had to all-of-a-sudden roast peanuts instead of coffee, we would do that in order to maintain what we’re doing with our employees.” While Huckleberry started out as and remains a quality-focused coffee roaster, Goedman and Farrar have grown to see fantastic coffee as a kind of bonus, a very welcome surprise—even after all these years. At the same time, Farrar says, the specialty coffee industry’s obsession with “excellence” isn’t exactly the point for the Huck team. “I feel like in specialty coffee, [excellence] has been the biggest thing for my whole career. Well, I’m not excellent in everything that I do! Why put that pressure on yourself and others? Do a good job, treat people well, and when you’re wrong, own it and try not to be that way.”

Reflecting on her journey in specialty coffee, Williamson describes the transition from a hyper-focus on the cream of the crop to a broader understanding of what coffee lovers really love. “I’ve gained a lot of appreciation for something that’s not a super-light roast, because you have to realize that’s alienating 99 percent of coffee drinkers. As a company that’s really focused on people and trying to bring people in and make them feel comfortable, I think that our lineup is a part of that mission to have something for everyone. We have fun, funky specialty drinks [in the cafes], and I think Huck just tries to be approachable. We’re just happy to have you in the doors, even if you’re not getting a \$6, \$7 pour-over.”

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Huckleberry's name in lights at its beloved downtown cafe, located in the Dairy Block Building between the iconic Union Station and Coors Field.

"In general, I think [we avoid] that weird purist vibe that I think a lot of coffee companies have, like, 'You have to do it a certain way,' or, 'We won't sell to these types of companies because they're not our image,'" Williamson continues. "Avoiding that really creates this environment of freedom. The road is wide open, essentially, and we can take the company in all of these different directions. We're not so concerned with being perfect purists."

Nealon says that flexibility is the key to success, not only in business, but also in developing and maintaining relationships. To be flexible, to be nimble as a roasting company, not only means being able to constantly evaluate the quality of the coffee they have on contract, but also allows Huck to be open to new approaches in roasting.

"I think that as a roastery, if you're too rigid in your focus or your view of what you can do and what you don't do, you run a serious risk of lying to yourself or lying to your customers about who you are and what you're doing," Nealon says. "We've certainly seen some shifts in our customer base, which we see from a roasting side of things. When I first started at Huckleberry seven years ago, we were looking at small multi-roaster cafes as our wholesale volume. Then we'd sort of grown to realize and really appreciate more attainable ways for people to enjoy our coffee, whether that be grocery, or restaurants that are not necessarily looking for microlots, and then recently a pretty big shift to online, which everybody has had to experience with [the covid-19 pandemic]. We have

tried to grow the number of people who can enjoy Huckleberry and get into specialty coffee, we've bit-by-bit increased our focus into wider and wider coffees, and increased the amount of places that we pay attention to trying to do good coffee."

Goedman adds, "I love coffee and I love the product that we make because it allows us to do a lot of stuff, but I think what's important is that it's what we're doing together and how we're connecting to one another. I mean, if it was just coffee, I think I'd lose interest pretty quick."

IN THE WINNER'S CIRCLE

In the end, it all comes back to the coffee, and while the Huck team might generally be self-conscious about celebrating their success, this award is very meaningful to them all.

"It feels like a big deal," Goedman says. "This last year has been all the things. It's been heavy. It's been sad. It's been discouraging. It's been really hard."

We expect many readers will share that sentiment, but what has buoyed us as coffee roasting professionals is a love of what we do, and the support of our community of peers and customers. Huck is no different.

"Along with all the heavier, sad things, we've been growing. We've been busy. We've made new connections. We've rekindled connections with people we've lost touch with," Goedman says. "We are already looking at what's next. That's just the nature of any small business, but maybe especially a coffee business where you do have a limited amount of time to seize your moment. We're mindful that we're still in ours. We're lucky that ours has been fairly long, which is nice. If we get to 20 years as a company, I'll be really excited."

EVER MEISTER has been a coffee professional and journalist for more than two decades, and is the author of New York City Coffee: A Caffeinated History (The History Press, 2017).



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