

2021
ROASTER
of the **YEAR**
MICRO CATEGORY

GREATER GOODS COFFEE COMPANY



By Emily Puro

Photos courtesy of Greater Goods Coffee Company

FOR A COMPANY HEADING INTO its sixth year of operation, weathering a pandemic that has devastated many other small businesses, and whose owners had virtually no experience in the coffee industry when they decided to start a roastery, Greater Goods Coffee Company—*Roast's* 2021 Micro Roaster of the Year—has a remarkably impressive story.

It all started in 2012, when co-founder Khanh Trang accompanied fellow co-founder Trey Cobb on a business trip to Portland, Oregon. A commercial photographer at the time, Trang had always been interested in coffee, so when she realized the Specialty Coffee Association of America (now SCA) was hosting its annual conference nearby, she decided to check it out. She was so inspired by what she experienced that weekend, she and Cobb decided to make coffee their new career.

Just eight years later, Trang is now a licensed Q-Grader and SCA Community Coordinator for the South Central Region, and Cobb is an Authorized SCA Trainer, a Q Processing Level 2 Professional, and a member of the Coffee Roasters Guild Membership Committee. What's more, not only are they operating a successful roasting company, coffee bar and two cafes that continue to thrive in the midst of the current economic crisis, they also opened an SCA Premier Training Campus in 2018 that offers instruction for every SCA educational pathway.

QUALITY AND COMMUNITY

The original idea was simply to open a roastery to supply wholesale accounts, but Trang and Cobb quickly realized they wanted to open a cafe as well.

"We decided to open a cafe so we could present the types of coffees that we were excited about in the manner that we felt they were best represented," says Cobb, "and also to be able to better communicate our story."



Trey Cobb, left, and Khanh Trang, co-founders of Greater Goods Coffee Company.

THE WINNER'S STATS

ROASTING OUTPUT: 90,900 pounds

ESTABLISHED: 2015

LOCATION: Austin, Texas, area

EMPLOYEES: 24

LEADERSHIP: Khanh Trang, co-founder and head of cafe; Trey Cobb, co-founder and head of operations.

RETAIL LOCATIONS: Three

ROASTERS (MACHINES): Loring S35 Kestrel; Loring S15 Falcon; Mill City 1-kilo; Ikawa sample roaster; Probat two-drum PRZ sample roaster

WEBSITE: greatergoodsroasting.com

That story focuses on giving back to the community—which includes the local community in and around Austin, Texas, as well as the larger specialty coffee community.

"We started Greater Goods as a way to highlight how amazing coffee can be, and at the same time give back and raise awareness around community issues both at origin and at home," explains Trang.

And while many coffee companies support local charities with special roasts and blends, Greater Goods makes a donation to a local charity with every 12-ounce retail bag of coffee it sells. To amplify the power of



ABOVE
East 5th Cafe interior.

PRECEDING PAGE
The Greater Goods
Coffee Company team.

those donations, the company doesn't promote the amount of money it donates, but rather the impact of each purchase. When a customer purchases a bag of Greater Goods' Kickstart espresso blend, for example, they're providing four meals to the Central Texas Food Bank. Taking home a bag of the A.M. Rescue blend? You just funded one day of rehabilitative training for a rescue pet at Austin Pets Alive!

"You can see the impact it has on customers," says Sara Gibson, the company's head roaster and green buyer. "Their purchase, and the donation that goes along with it, becomes more tangibly meaningful to them. They ask us questions about the organizations we support and why we support them, which allows us to have these great conversations about coffee, community and sustainability."

To date, the company has donated nearly \$50,000 to the Central Texas Food Bank (close to 200,000 meals); more than \$32,000 to Austin Pets Alive! (about 29,000 days of training); more than \$14,270 to the Boys and Girls Clubs of Austin (about 7,000 club days); and more than \$25,000 to the Autism Society of Texas.

In 2020, Greater Goods started an additional giving campaign called "Let's Make Good" to support even more local causes. Customers and staff nominate local

charities, causes and individuals working to better the community, and each month the company selects one to receive a \$200 donation and a spotlight on Greater Goods' social media platforms.

"It allows us to shed light and a little love on organizations and people who may have slipped under the radar of our everyday experiences," says barista-turned-content creator Miranda Haney. "It gives us an opportunity to hear stories from our customers about the people that inspire and motivate them."

That spirit of giving extends to the entire coffee community, from producers at origin to fellow roasters and retailers. The company makes a concerted effort to partner with producers who provide living wages, offer employee benefits, and use agricultural practices that protect the environment. To support them in those efforts—and to ensure they can invest in their farms and their own communities—Greater Goods pays, on average, three times more than the "C" Market rate.

"We really try to honor our position in the supply chain," says Gibson. "As roasters, we're selling to the public, so we get the opportunity to talk price with them and explain why it's a good thing that we're all paying more for coffee. And then, as green buyers, we get to put our money where our mouth is. We want producers at origin to thrive, and we want coffee to stick around on this planet for a while. We take our responsibility in all that seriously."

Connecting and collaborating with local coffee professionals is also a focus for the company.

"Coffee is so much about community in general," says Trang. "I just want to be accessible to people and be able to share resources."

To that end, prior to the pandemic, the company hosted Austin Coffee Collective meetings as well as classes, discussion panels and other events in its training lab.

"Since we have the training center," says Cobb, "it's easy for us to host events. We'll bring in importers and they'll bring in coffees and we'll invite all the other roasters in the area to come in and cup the coffees in the same place. We've hosted events for COE [Cup of Excellence] where we've brought in COE coffees and let everybody cup them together and see

if we wanted to create a buying group." They've also invited local roasters to taste the results of research Cobb performed with a colleague in Hawaii on different fermentation methods. (More on that to come.)

"We come at it with the attitude that we learn more together than we do apart," Cobb explains. "If we can all elevate the Austin coffee scene and, bigger picture, the Texas coffee scene, that's a benefit for us all. We all have a different style and approach with our cafes and the coffees we offer, so it didn't seem like there were any negatives. There are only positives for us to work together. The more we can grow together, the better it is for all of us."

RESEARCH AND EDUCATION

Building community was a big part of the inspiration behind opening an SCA Premier Training Campus, too.

"We wanted to make it accessible," says Trang. "When I was learning, I really struggled to find anybody who was willing to show me the ropes, and there wasn't a place close by where I could take classes. I was lucky that I had the means to travel to training and SCA events. Not everyone can do that. Our hope with our campus is that it creates more opportunities for people in Texas."

Before going into the coffee business, Cobb worked in engineering, and he wanted coffee professionals to see specialty coffee as a lifelong career with numerous paths, much the same way his former colleagues looked at engineering.

"One thing we are especially proud of is the fact that we teach the full SCA curriculum," he says. "We teach every pathway. One of the reasons we did it is, in order to teach and be an effective instructor, it forces you to master the skills you're teaching. So I think it really helped enrich us as individuals, knowing that if we're going to be teaching other people, we really need to invest in ourselves to get as much knowledge and experience as we can."

In keeping with Cobb's background in engineering, research has also become a strong focus for Greater Goods. Take the company's work on the effects of water chemistry on coffee flavor. After listening to



ABOVE Head Roaster Sara Gibson.



BELOW Micaela Cantu, assistant cafe manager, teaches an online class.



Miranda Haney, barista-turned-content creator.

a lecture on water chemistry at one of the first SCA events Cobb and Trang attended, they started “down that rabbit hole,” he says, and haven’t looked back.

“Knowing that the coffee we drink is 98 percent water, it’s important for us to understand that ingredient,” Cobb explains. “At our cafes and the roastery we use a GC [gas chromatography] system, which allows us to precisely formulate our water, so we’ve played with different levels of TDS [total dissolved solids] to see how it would impact the tasting experience.”

“The TDS makeup can affect how coffee extracts, how the acidity presents itself, and our perception of body,” adds Gibson. “Knowing about the water that our customers use can inform how we roast, as well as our brewing recommendations.”

In another tie-in with Cobb’s engineering background, the team has been developing a system to pinpoint first crack in its Loring roasters.

“The Lorings are very well insulated so you can’t hear the first crack,” Cobb says. “I wanted a reliable and measurable way of detecting it.”

Knowing that first crack creates a sound wave or vibration within the roasting chamber, he harnessed a tool from his days in the automotive industry called a knock sensor (a piezoelectric sensor), which measures vibration.

“I mounted it to the front face of the roaster, the drum, and we hooked it up to the computer and used

software that visualizes the vibration that the sensor is detecting,” he explains.

The system is still crude and “takes someone who’s a little too engineering to work with [it] right now,” Cobb notes, but “the goal is to make it so anyone who’s using Cropster can just hook this up and it can auto-detect first crack.”

Cobb has also gone down the rabbit hole of experimentation with processing methods, beginning with the training to become a Q Processing Professional.

“I think it’s because of my engineering background,” he says. “I really enjoy the science and the technical aspect of coffee. Understanding how coffee processing impacts what we need to do on the roasting side is extremely interesting.”

As part of the Q Processing certification program, run by the Coffee Quality Institute, Cobb traveled to El Salvador. There he met Juli Burden, a research assistant at the Hawaii Agricultural Research Center, who was also taking the course. He later traveled to Burden’s lab in Hawaii where the two inoculated fermentations with different yeasts and experimented with fermentation times and aerobic versus anaerobic fermentation to determine how different methods impact flavor. Of course, in the spirit of community that’s so ingrained in the Greater Goods culture, Cobb brought the research coffees back to Texas where the team sample roasted them and invited other local roasters to the training lab to cup the coffees and discuss the results.

THE HUMAN ELEMENT

Taking care of their employees is also a key focus for Trang and Cobb. Starting with the basics, they pay a living wage and provide company-sponsored health and dental insurance and paid time off to all full-time employees. They also encourage and support staff in pursuing professional development opportunities, beginning with staff onboarding.

“We want to give them a strong start,” says Trang of the company’s employee orientation program. “They go through cupping sessions, so they get to learn what



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Greater Goods training lab.

all of our coffees taste like, then they take a quiz about our coffees and our company. Simultaneously, our lead baristas are working with them on shift to ensure that they feel supported and prepared.” Greater Goods staff also have access to all the classes offered through the SCA Premier Training Campus, paying only what it costs the company to provide each class.

This has led to a number of staff promotions, as well as strong staff retention. The company’s first employee, Ian Hinkle, started as a teenager doing barista work along with odd jobs in the roastery. Now he’s an Authorized SCA Trainer and wholesale trainer. Current and former baristas serve many roles within the company. Haney works in marketing; Micaela Cantu is an assistant cafe manager; Selina Gonzales teaches public cupping classes; and Josh Saltzman is apprenticing as a roaster. Dorian Arcos—yet another former barista—built on previous technical experience to become the company’s full-time equipment technician and an active member of the SCA Coffee Technicians Guild.

“If they demonstrate to us a desire to learn and they’re willing to put in the effort,” says Cobb, “we’ll give them every resource we have available to us to help them grow in that area. In some cases, it might be a need that we have, an immediate place for them, or it might be something where they’re going to continue to grow and move outside our company, but we enjoy being able to be that resource for people to continue to grow. It makes the coffee community better overall.”

“Greater Goods has given me a lot of professional support, more than any other coffee job I’ve ever had,” says Haney, who competed in the U.S. Barista Championship in early 2020. “Without the motivation and guidance of my peers in the community, I would have never even thought of competing in U.S. Coffee Championships, let alone imagine myself getting all the way to nationals. That experience was totally life changing. Working with Greater Goods is the first time I’ve seen coffee as a viable, and preferable, career pathway.”

THE EFFECTS OF THE PANDEMIC

It should come as no surprise that Trang and Cobb have met the challenges of the covid-19 pandemic with a strong focus on caring for their employees and their community.

They began by implementing extensive safety measures to keep their staff and customers healthy. This included curbside pickup, social distancing, requiring masks of staff and customers, staff temperature checks, hand sanitizer stations, and paid quarantine leave. (While they haven’t had any staff test positive, they wanted their employees to know they can take time off if they need it.)

“Being in Texas, we’ve had pushback on this from some customers,” says Gibson, “but it’s important to us to do right by our team.”

Remarkably, Greater Goods has not had to lay off any cafe staff because of the pandemic.

“We haven’t shut down a single day at the cafes,” says Cobb. “We knew the very likely eventuality was going to be a lockdown, so we had everything in place prior. We have perhaps an advantage in that we do farmers markets every weekend, we’ve been doing that since we started, so we knew how to set up an outside grab-and-go concept.”

The roastery never stopped operating, and while the company did reduce hours at its cafe locations, the management team worked hard to ensure the staff’s financial stability. By enrolling in the Texas

Shared Work Program, which pays unemployment benefits (including federal CARES Act payments) to workers whose hours have been reduced, and applying for and receiving funds from the Small Business Administration’s Paycheck Protection Program, combined with the company’s own “internal disaster fund,” Greater Goods has been able to pay all of its staff without interruption. In fact, the company has added staff and wholesale accounts during the pandemic.

And while the SCA pathways classes are still mostly on hold because they require a great deal of practical, hands-on coursework, the company has begun developing community classes to fit the new, virtual reality. A weekly Sunday morning brew-along on Instagram has proven especially popular.

“I love watching people get it,” says Haney, who leads many of the brew-alongs. “I feel like there’s a tendency to view coffee as some kind of exclusive club, so it’s a lot of fun to kind of break those barriers down and just meet people where they are on a human level.”

In addition, Greater Goods is rolling out virtual cupping kits—complete with cupping bowl, spoon, coffee samples and flavor wheel—and Cobb is planning to resume in-person roasting classes by hosting groups who work together regularly and can therefore safely gather during the pandemic.

Training for wholesale accounts also has resumed, with masks and social distancing in place. That training involves practical barista and brewing instruction, as well as in-depth guidance from the company’s wholesale manager, Jason Cain, which is especially helpful for customers who are new to the coffee business.

“We’re deeply invested in the success of our wholesale partners,” says Cain. “We provide a full array of services, including pre-construction consultation, equipment selection and ongoing training. From a personal point of view, I truly enjoy working with a client who has nothing more than an idea for their dream cafe, and guiding them through the maze until they get to opening day.”



Co-founder Khanh Trang tasting coffee.

Team bonding events have taken a hit during the pandemic, but the company has started to reimagine what its regular staff meet-ups might look like when moved online, and has hosted cuppings and discussions via Zoom. Staff also have held a few socially distanced outdoor events, like a picnic and a movie night.

“We just want to make sure that they’re still thriving, mentally and emotionally,” says Trang. “We’re doing our best to provide some sense of normalcy, [and] space for our team to unite, learn and grow.”

“I’m proud to work for a company that does such a great job at connection,” says Cain. “At the end of the day, coffee is a wonderful product, but a product nonetheless. It’s the people involved and their relationships that really matter.”



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, Northwest Palate, 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 the remarkable professionals throughout the supply chain devoting their lives to this work.