

roast



M A G A Z I N E

2016 Micro Roaster of the Year



PROPELLER COFFEE CO., FROM LEFT TO RIGHT: Kristi Tethong, director of events; Meghan Goodfellow, director of operations and customer service; Losel Tethong, co-founder and co-owner; Matthew Collier, barista and cafe supervisor; Geoff Polci, co-founder, co-owner and coffee buyer; Eric Bruce, head roaster; Jonathan Cox, head of coffee lab and assistant roaster. (Not pictured: Eric Mahovich, barista and trainer.) | *photo by Alex Beetham*

Propeller Coffee Co.

Micro Roaster of the YEAR

Like most new roasters, Propeller Coffee Co. started small.

Founders Geoff Polci and Losel Tethong had full-time gigs elsewhere—Polci as owner of a small chain of cafes in Toronto called Crema, Tethong as a sustainability consultant for Fortune 500 companies—so they could afford to be deliberate. They spent the first six months roasting a few hundred pounds of coffee per week for Crema.

“We both had the air cover and financial flexibility to completely nail all of our processes,” says Tethong. “We wanted to be confident in every single production roast, record the data, combine the results and build up the huge data set we now use to refine our roast profiles.”

Mission accomplished. A mere two years later, Propeller Coffee is *Roast’s* 2016 Micro Roaster of the Year, winning acclaim throughout the roasting community for the quality of its coffee and its impassioned commitment to sustainability.

A Perfect Partnership

Crema begat Propeller, but it took a few years. Polci founded Crema in 2008 in Toronto’s fast-changing Junction neighborhood, which at the time was populated by pawn shops and payday loan stores. In fact, Crema replaced one of those payday loan stores. Polci considered starting a roastery instead—he had already roasted coffee for a restaurant he owned in Costa Rica—but couldn’t find the right location.

“The coffee scene was just getting started here back then,” Polci recalls. “We helped move things forward. I’m glad it worked out the way it did.”

Tethong is, too. As one of Crema’s earliest customers, he remembers being entranced by the cafe’s quality.

“I couldn’t believe the difference between the average big corporate coffee and what Geoff was doing at Crema,” he says. “I drank coffee in the Navy for 10 years and in airport and hotel restaurants for 15 years as a consultant. I’d never experienced anything quite like it.”

After roughly five years interacting as cafe owner and customer, the pair started to talk business.

“I wanted to have more control over the coffees we source, and roast them how I wanted them to be roasted,” Polci says.

Tethong had a love of coffee and the sustainability background to make sure their new venture maintained a low environmental footprint.

“We talked about what we could do to stand out in Canada, where the roasting scene was still relatively new compared to the U.S.,” says Tethong. “Obviously it begins with great coffee, and Geoff gave me a master class on sourcing and roasting. We went from there to customer service, and what it would mean to completely blow away customers. And then sustainability came naturally to us because of my background and Geoff’s own work on sustainability in coffee.”

Taking Sustainability Seriously

Almost everything about Propeller is engineered to minimize the company’s environmental footprint. Propeller is located in a small industrial and design pocket on the west end of Toronto’s downtown core, reducing the impact of deliveries and making it easier to engage with customers and the community. The roastery is housed in a 100-year-old

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Propeller Coffee Co. in Toronto. | photo by Liam Mogan

THE WINNER’S STATS

ESTABLISHED 2013

LOCATION Toronto, Ontario, Canada

EMPLOYEES 11

LEADERSHIP Co-founders Geoff Polci and Losel Tethong

RETAIL LOCATIONS One

ROASTERS (MACHINES) Loring Smart Roast Kestrel S35

ROASTING OUTPUT 33,000 pounds per year

WEBSITE www.propellercoffee.com



Propeller's coffee bar. | photo by Kristin Sjaarda

factory building that had been gutted as part of a loft conversion project that stalled.

“We started with almost a blank slate,” Tethong recalls. “Late nights, after we finished our day jobs, we sat down to figure out what the ideal layout would be. We decided to make all our process flows as efficient as possible.”

They began with the floor, an 8,000-square-foot concrete slab with more than two miles of piping embedded inside—insulated by a tractor-trailer’s worth of recycled 3-inch foam insulation. The in-floor heating may be the facility’s biggest energy saver.

Next, they completely leak-sealed the building, filling every gap all the way up to the 14-foot roof deck with spray foam. A rooftop solar project is in the works, adding solar thermal hot water systems to supplement the building’s high-efficiency boiler.

Because of the facility’s remarkable energy efficiency, Propeller can afford to purchase 100 percent of its power from Bullfrog Power, Canada’s leading supplier of renewable energy. The roaster’s electricity comes entirely from solar, run-of-river and wind projects, while 100 percent of its natural gas comes from landfill gas reclamation projects.

“We believe we may have the lowest footprint of any roaster in Canada, and one of the lowest in North America,” Tethong says. “We’re trying to quantify that now with a LEED certification and external audit.”

The company’s Loring Smart Roast Kestrel S35 roaster also is an essential element in its sustainability mission. The sealed-drum design has no need for an afterburner and requires 80 percent less gas than traditional roaster designs.

“Propeller’s gas bill isn’t much more than what we pay to heat our homes in the winter,” says Tethong.

Because the Loring is designed to meet California’s strict emissions standards, Propeller doesn’t need special permission to use it in the downtown neighborhood. Just as important, it roasts extremely clean-tasting coffee. The sealed drum keeps smoke and exhaust from coming into contact with the coffee, allowing Propeller to use more heat without imparting ashy or smoky flavors.

“We’re able to roast our high-density, high-elevation coffees like Kenyans and Ethiopians really, really efficiently,” Polci says. “These coffees take heat well, but can

lose flavor in longer roasts. With the Loring, our shortest roast is around eight minutes.”

On the transportation side of the business, Propeller partners with Canada’s AutoShare vehicle sharing company on a concept called Virtual Fleet.

“We don’t own or lease any vehicles,” Tethong says. “We use AutoShare’s vehicles for all our deliveries and roasting operations, mostly at nonpeak hours.”

Because Propeller commits to using the vehicles at least two days each week, AutoShare leases the vehicles to the company at a substantial discount. AutoShare has become such a big fan of the concept that it’s now marketing it to other craft roasters, brewers and distillers in the Canadian market.

For smaller deliveries, Propeller uses Good Foot Delivery—a point-to-point delivery service that employs individuals with developmental disabilities. All deliveries are made by foot or via public transit.

“We use it for everything from basic courier letters and contracts to small ‘air drops’ of coffee, for retail accounts that need immediate replacements of up to 20 pounds,” Tethong says.

Propeller also is pursuing certification as a B Corporation, a program that verifies a company’s commitment to meeting rigorous standards for social and environmental performance, accountability and transparency.

Building Relationships at Origin and at Home

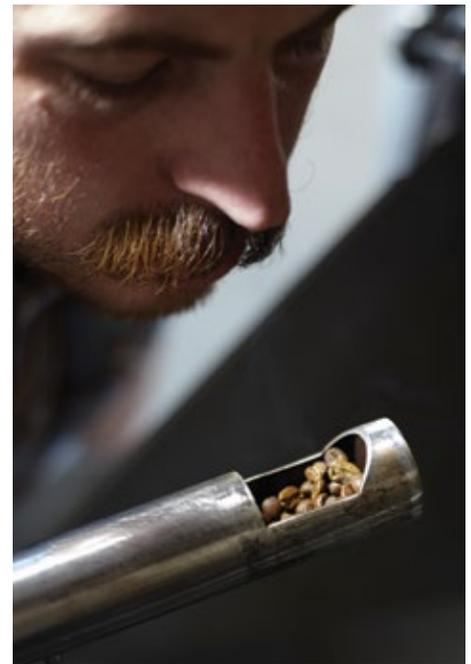
Direct sourcing is an important part of Propeller’s mission, but as a relatively young roaster, the company doesn’t yet have the resources to build a comprehensive program.

“We have a small team and we’re very busy,” says Polci, “but we’ll get there as we add more people.”

Polci visited Costa Rica earlier this year and bought several small lots. The long-term plan is for roughly 80 to 90 percent of the coffees the company roasts to be either direct trade or relationship coffees. One way to accelerate that timeline is through Propeller’s relationship with roasters in East Asia, Australasia and Europe.

“If we can make the budget work, we’re going to do some joint sourcing trips with some of the best of the best around the world,” explains Tethong.

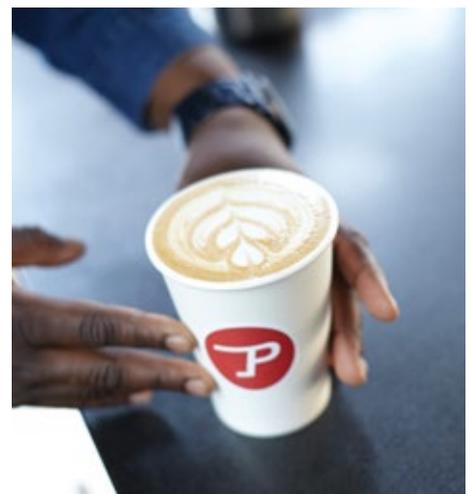
But great coffee can’t reach a customer’s cup without the final piece of the puzzle:



Head roaster Eric Bruce sniffing the wares. photo by Derek Shapton



Co-owners Geoff Polci (left) and Losel Tethong cupping. | photo by Derek Shapton



Coffee at Propeller. | photo by Derek Shapton

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LEFT A view of the roasting room from Propeller's cafe. | *photo by Kristin Sjaarda* **MIDDLE** Propeller developed and launched its own cold brew during summer 2015. *photo by Mike Mahovich* **RIGHT** Propeller collaborated with a local artisan to create its own line of handcrafted ceramics, all thrown, glazed and fired in the Propeller in-house studio. | *photo by Kristi Tethong*



At work in the roastery. | *photo by Kristin Sjaarda*



Head roaster Eric Bruce, aka Bruce. *photo by Derek Shapton*

training and awareness. Propeller offers a full range of coffee education for all wholesale and restaurant customers, on topics such as coffee varieties, origins, processing, sourcing and key elements of roasting.

To support these activities, the company built a cupping lab and training room with a high-definition, 10,000-lumens projector and a 10-foot screen to facilitate multimedia training sessions, including live-stream collaboration with roasters and speakers from around the world. The location doubles as an event space in the evening hours, with room for weddings, private dinners, book launches, film screenings and fundraisers.

One of the co-founders' favorite fundraisers was an event they hosted themselves. Called Chefs for Change, the event brought in roughly 40 chefs from across Canada for a four-night dinner series.

"The goal was twofold," says Tethong. "We wanted to raise awareness and funds for Community Food Centres Canada, which is focused on food security for at-risk families and individuals. But we also wanted to work with chefs to help them understand coffee as something more than an after-dinner beverage. We helped develop their palates and built some great relationships in the process."

Propeller also donates coffee for FoodShare fundraising events. The Toronto nonprofit works with communities and schools to deliver healthful food and food education, often using gardens and other community spaces to grow their own food.

A Commitment to 'Doing It Right'

For a relatively small roaster, Propeller has made

significant investments in quality assurance. The company's technology includes a ColorTrack Laser Refractometer that reveals the color differential between the inside and outside of roasted coffee; a Sinar AP 6060 for analyzing the moisture content of green samples; and a Cropster roast tracking system that records every roast for later analysis.

"Everything works together, helping us improve our roasts on a weekly basis," Polci says.

The team, adds Tethong, is just as in sync as the equipment.

"When we do cuppings, we do it as a team, and I think we've all gelled to a point where it's very collaborative," he says. "We agree on the samples, the sourcing, how we can tweak our roaster and roast profiles, all the way through to the training."

With only two years under their belts as roasters, it might seem surprising that Polci and Tethong have made such an impact on the local and national roasting scenes—but it shouldn't. The partners have worked hard at their craft, which they honed in their previous roles.

"We're new to roasting, but not new to coffee," Polci says. "We've been doing this for almost 10 years."

"We knew we'd do this as well as we possibly and humanly could," says Tethong. "You either do it right or you don't do it. We wanted to do it right."



RIVERS JANSSEN is a senior writer and editor for AHA!, a creative communications agency located in Vancouver, Washington, but he still writes about coffee whenever he can. He can be reached via email at riversjanssen@gmail.com.