

MASTERS OF THEIR CRAFT

AARON CARLSON // LITTLE AMPS COFFEE ROASTERS

Over the years coffee has become so much more than coffee itself. It fuels our days, fills our Instagram feeds, accompanies rich conversation, is perfected, bragged about, and experimented with. We dress it up with latte art and fancy milk or we simply take it black. Whatever the medium, coffee has become an art. Cafes and coffee shops are a staple in any town or city. They are a gathering place. They foster community and provide a space that relationships can be created. First dates, business meetings, study sessions, and catching up with old friends - all based on connecting with others.

So coffee is never just coffee. It is a bridge to deeper more meaningful relationships and is the birthplace for new ideas and creative endeavors. Whether it be person to person or a city at large, coffee shops play a crucial role in community development.

Aaron Carlson, owner of Little Amps Coffee Roasters, began his coffee roasting journey living in Oakland, California. While riding around in an old van and pursuing a career in music, Aaron discovered Blue Bottle, a company that knew how to serve great coffee. After his experience with Blue Bottle, Aaron began roasting his own coffee, and a few years later Little Amps Coffee Roasters was born. With a well-designed space, good vibes, friendly employees and of course great coffee, Little Amps has made its mark in the city of Harrisburg.

Three locations later, Little Amps continues to seek out and serve quality coffee. Whether it be live music, their record shop, promoting local businesses, or providing a cool space for people to hang out, Little Amps has developed a rich culture that is consistently communicated throughout the business.

We had the privilege of doing the majority of this Masters of Their Craft interview in-person. Both Aaron and Peter, Little Amp's Development Manager, chatted with us about their journey, the business, and showed us around the shops.

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AARON CARLSON OF LITTLE AMPS

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How did you begin?

Aaron: So I was living in Oakland, CA and Blue Bottle just started as a company. They had coffee down the street at the farmers market from where I lived and I was like “cool its different, it’s just good coffee.” So then I bought a home roaster and started learning everything I could. I bought my first commercial roaster upon arriving in PA.

Operating a coffee company...is that something you imagined yourself doing years ago?

Aaron: I had the notion to open a coffee shop or a bar or some kind of space. I wanted to do something. Actually, I didn’t want to do that (open up a space). I wanted to be a rock star, surfer - but those didn’t pan out. I’m mediocre at both of those things.

Where did the name Little Amps come from?

Aaron: Always enjoyed little amps – sounding good when they are trying hard...easy to carry!

CHAR co.

Did you always intend to open multiple shops in Harrisburg?

Aaron: NO.

What did your process of deciding to expand look like?

Aaron: Driven by demand. We thought we'd be oversaturating with three locations in Harrisburg, but all is well!

What are you passionate about within the realm of coffee shops other than coffee?

Peter: Well I joined the company because all of the sudden there was a cool place to be in Harrisburg. I was living in Philadelphia and traveling around the country and around the world and was exposed to a lot of things and felt that those things were not in Harrisburg, ya know? You come to your hometown and see your parents and get grounded. One time my mom was like "There's this really cool new place called Little Amps and I think you'll really like it." And I really liked it. I was like "whoa, the aesthetic is nice," - not even worried about how the coffee tasted.

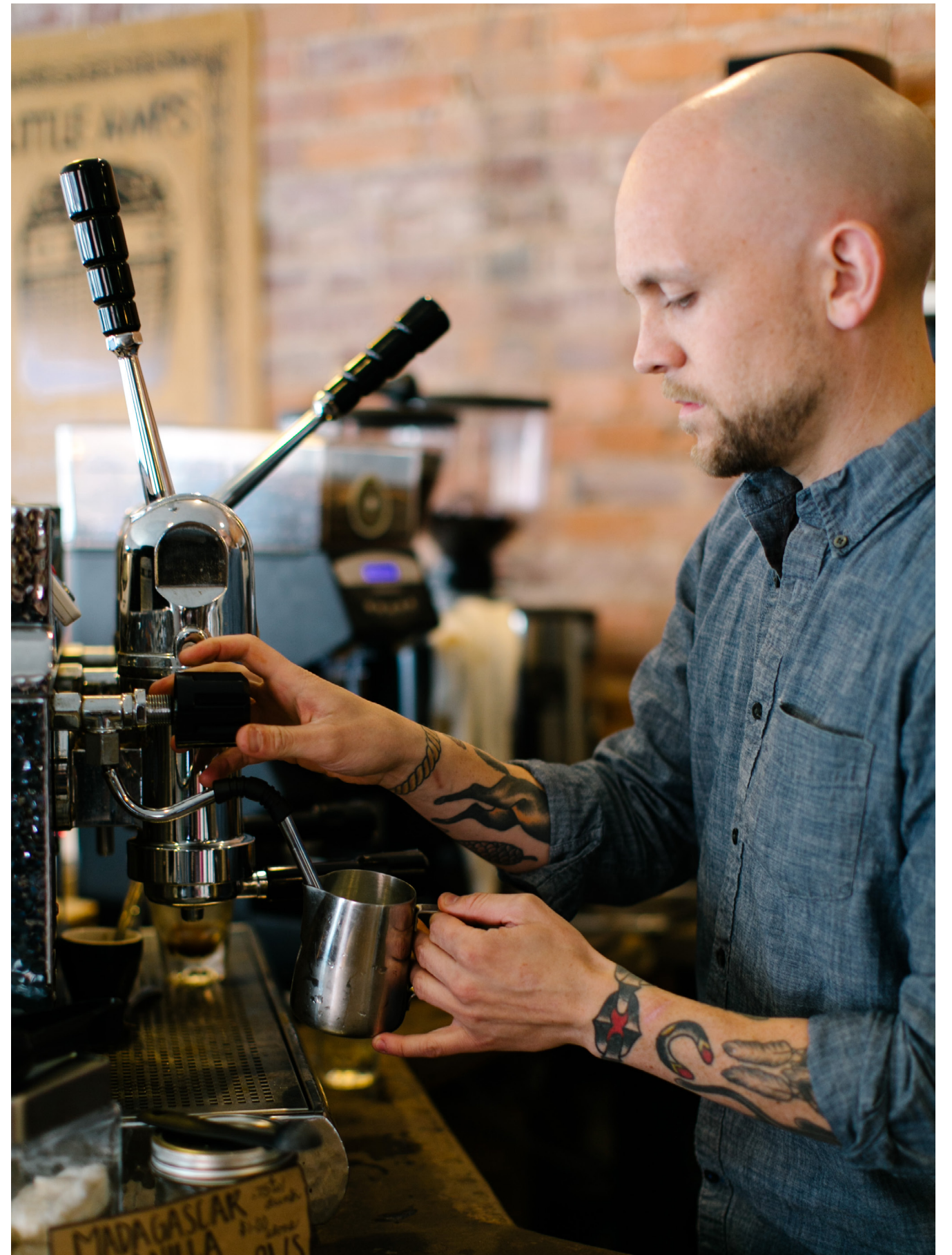
At that point I said, "Give me a black coffee," which is the best way to onboard someone. Those are the best customers. Get the guys that say "get me a black coffee." And we're like "great your going to like this."

Also, being able to meet people. I have met so many people. I met my current partner and mother of my child and met my band mates, and other business owners. All kinds of neat and interesting people come through Little Amps and they still do. It feels good now to help Aaron facilitate that.

Aaron: That's a typical story. It's a good connector. Just setting it up I had a very specific thing in mind in terms of aesthetic and I think it was just executed really well by the crew. Now people are just kind of changing it and contributing to it from within our company and not within our company. And ya know, we didn't have to make it all. It just gets made.

Peter: The shop manager here at Green St. was like "Hey we should bring the comfy chairs up front and put a couch out," and it was the best idea we have had in years. It's simple stuff. It's been cool to be a part of a company that encourages that.







And that just combined with what is really good coffee. Aaron has been making coffee for over 5 years - going on 6 in some form. It just gets better and we are buying more exciting and higher quality coffee all the time and meeting more people within our industry that help get us better coffee and expose us to new equipment. It's just constant self-improvement, which is very cool when you can continue to do that and get better. We think we're the best in this town and we want to try and stay the best.

What has your proudest moment as a business owner been?

Aaron: I'm always proud when we can show folks what coffee can do for the first time. Of course, I'm also proud and thankful to be a part of the community!

You sell vinyl records and host live musicians. How or why has music become such a big part of who you are as a business?

Aaron: I trace this back to seeing a cover band play IRON MAN in the 5th grade. I think it was our vice principal's band! But yeah, it has been/will be tied into who we are. Most of our crew plays, teaches, or is into music.



You guys have a really distinct culture . I know you said it was organic. Do you look for that in your employees?

Aaron: When coffee shops were first starting out, there were a lot of shops that were just known for having chilly service. We don't do that here. We're not like "Here's your thing. We don't have milk and sugar on the premises. Here's your thing."

So when I opened I knew that's not what we wanted at all because Harrisburg doesn't even know what we're doing. You know, the prices are going to be higher and all that stuff. We were trying to be nice. I'm a pretty sunshiney kind of guy and I think everybody is that we work with

Peter: Yeah there's a personality that you attract, that Aaron attracts, that I attract. I think we have hired a fair amount of people at this point. Four years of retail and we've employed close to 30 people, but we've also had people that are here for over two years. There are five to six people on staff right now that have worked well over two years and we love them





Can you tell us about your team? What do you look for when hiring new team members?

Aaron: Our crew rules. I'm very fortunate to have such a great group of people. We always get a bunch of great resumes whenever there's an open spot, so in that way we've been very fortunate. Basically, our crew embodies our ethos: amazing coffee, laid back vibe. So folks are into coffee, ready to learn, nice, fun and kind!

Peter: There is definitely a type of person that wants to work here. It's like a coffee person but it's also a personality. We've had people that weren't coffee people, like myself, that end up working here.

Aaron: We pay pretty well. You can live as a barista in Harrisburg if you're single and pay the bills. But we also kind of have an exciting thing that's more like potential. We're a growing company and you could be "the person" in this company.

Peter: We've made jobs. We made a job for me. There are three distinct store managers and a part time HR person. We hired someone who is a budding journalist that can help us out, or someone who is a graphic designer who can do stuff, or an artist. People are finding ways to flex their skill sets within the company beyond just making coffee.

Aaron: Yeah and we definitely encourage that. We'll pay your travel expenses to go to coffee conferences. I knew a guy who worked at Amoeba Records in Berkeley. They have a thing where you can go on tour whenever you want and your job will be there when you get back. I was like "oh that's cool, that's what a record shop guy should be able to do." So we also have that "going on tour thing" here. No one has really done it - but you're allowed to.

While we were interviewing Aaron and Peter, a family stopped by to say hello, thank them for what they do, and chatted about where they are from and why they love Little Amps:

Peter: That's the stuff we love. Because we are in an underserved market and they drove from Carlisle. They live in Carlisle and they come here regularly to like hang out and drink coffee. We love that. That makes you feel really really good. The guy who lives right across the street should come get coffee because they live right there, but the person who drives on a highway for 20-30 minutes...



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POUROVERS

- COLOMBIA LA MILAGROSA
 - Strawberry
 - Caramel
 - Plum
- COLOMBIA LOS NARANJOS
 - Bubble gum
 - grapefruit
 - tropical florals
- BURUNDI BUKEYE MUSUMBA
 - ASIAN PEAR
 - JUICY PLUM
 - RASPBERRY

SMALL BITES

- Soup \$4
 - w/crackers
- Fruit \$1
- egg \$1
- Yogurt \$1
- berries \$3.5
- quinoa salad





You said this is an underserved market?

Peter: In Harrisburg. yeah. There are some restaurants, but there is still a lot of room in food and drink.

Can you tell us a little bit about the future vision you have for Little Amps?

Aaron: Keep on keepin' on. We're feeling pretty good, but we're really drilling down on roasting and sourcing. I used to do everything, but with a solid crew in place taking care of the shops, drinks, vibes, and growth, etc. I'm able to devote a lot more time to roasting and sourcing. We're working on getting a sample roaster so that we can play with more experimental techniques. Right now, we roast in 20lb batches, so I try to only do things I know will work!

Can you tell us about how you are helping other coffee shops and enabling them to start?

Peter: We would love to open one of our shops again, but have someone else be the operator. We would help with design consulting and equipment and the whole layout - anything, all kinds of business consulting that they would need. And then just fill their coffee order every week. We would love to do that. But again, in central PA there aren't a lot of people that are like "I'm going to open a café," but we have been seeing it outside of PA. We have seen it in Frosberg Maryland, some friends of friends - Jon and Lizzie - they're going to open their place. Their head barista is coming up from Nashville from the Barista Parlor and they are down to buy the dope equipment we suggest them to buy.

They want to serve all Little Amps and we are feeling very excited about that because up until this point we have come into people's programs after they started which is fine, but it's a little harder to say "well you should actually really have this machine" and they are like " I already bought this one."

We are doing the same thing in Austin, Texas. There is going to be a restaurant and café there. Same deal. He's like "that machine looks amazing - I'll buy it." Just really listening to us. We try to work within their realistic range too.

Aaron: That's what every roasting company wants to do. You're trying to onboard people to carry your beans.

Peter: There is a lot of competition for that.







Aaron: For some reason we tend to attract the not-so corporate people that open coffee shops. Maybe they don't have their plan together 100% or whatever - we can help with that.

Peter: We have only started pursuing our wholesale actively a year ago and we have been a roaster for a while. You know, you play catch-up and you just pay attention to what other people are doing. Even though there is a lot of competition, it's fine because people still want to open cafes. Roasters still pop up. This industry is still growing. It's so crazy.

You sell other local products in your shops, was this always the intention, or did this idea grow as the business grew?

Aaron: Just kind of trying to keep it fresh and fun. Not really money in this, mostly just fun to have relationships and give a public space for what people are doing.

We know coffee fuels you—but what else do you get excited about?

Aaron: Family, travel, books, and rock and roll!

What is your favorite coffee drink?

Aaron: Honestly, I'm continuously stoked on new coffee farms, and processing techniques, and what we and other roasters are doing. So, new black coffees?

