

The aroma of coffee and spices and the heat of animated discussion fill the air of a bustling Durham coffee shop. An ambush of the senses strong enough to overwhelm the soul, this wordless greeting beckons visitors as if to say, “you’re welcome here.”

Long-time Cocoa Cinnamon co-owner, Areli Barrera deGrodski, stands near the counter, offering a warm smile to each passerby. “Can I offer you a coffee and a churro?” she says.

The community’s love for the environment offered by the shop is apparent. On a seemingly lazy Monday afternoon, few seats remain unoccupied, and employees shout the names of numerous waiting customers.

Leaning against the bike that once stood as the shop’s foundation, Areli smiles and laughs, brushing off her business’ evident success.

“It takes time to create trust within the community,” she says.

And it took lots of it, ten years, to be exact, for Cocoa Cinnamon to reach its current success-level. With three locations and a growing customer base, it’s safe to claim that the business is thriving. Success is never so cut-and-dry, however.

At the age of only 25, Areli married now-husband Leon and set out on a journey inspired by memories from her youth and the vibrancy of Mexican culture. She hoped to recreate the experiences of coffee shops past, taking inspiration from shops she frequented during time spent in Cherokee, NC. Shops that embraced indigenous heritage whilst simultaneously providing a welcoming space hit home for deGrodski. Having immigrated from Tijuana, Baja California, Mexico at the age of six, shops she visited regularly in Cherokee inspired her to honor the flavors of her birth country by way of creation of a space that embraced people from all walks of life.

With a small bike and limited cash, the shop was born. Long days spent carting around and selling coffee translated into an outcome she, admittedly, did not at first expect. Areli attributes the community of Durham to the shop’s initial, unexpected success.

“People would bring us tools and ask if we needed help,” she said. “Without our community, we wouldn’t have survived.”

The community’s warm embrace allowed the shop to expand beyond the confines of a simple bike, and Cocoa Cinnamon was officially born with its first location on Geer Street.

Now, she hopes to return the favor, and give the same dedication that the community had for her own shop back through creation of an authentic, hospitable space. DeGrodski has remained authentic to this promise, establishing a shop that has both remained true to her Hispanic heritage and a welcoming space “for all.” To deGrodski, these qualities are two sides of the same coin.

“When you make one community feel comfortable,” she says, “a lot of others feel comfortable.”

Hues of blue and yellow and splashes of orange and red dot the tablecloths that wrap each seating area. The familiar Spanish greeting, “hola,” along with a menu printed entirely in Spanish serve as small nods to deGrodski’s heritage. These are just a few of the elements of the shop designed to make visitors feel right at home.

“We wanted it to feel like you’re in your grandma’s kitchen,” she says.

A primarily women-of-color led business, deGrodski envisioned a shop that reflected the surrounding community of Durham. She desired a staff that mirrored the very city responsible for its success.

Diversity within her staff, she feels, has allowed for a more welcoming space, as a result.

And, by doing so, deGrodski’s once-small shop has grown to astronomical heights, with plans for continued growth. To a community that gave its hearts and believed in the success of Cocoa Cinnamon, the once-small shop gives back, not only through its inviting atmosphere, but through impactful action, as well.

“There are ways to have boundaries and be empathetic,” said deGrodski, detailing the ways in which Cocoa Cinnamon has extended a hand to those in need.

A challenge for the shop has been navigating assisting Durham’s most vulnerable, while also being sensitive to its customers. On this particular day, a woman requesting money at the store’s entrance continued to approach visitors. DeGrodski, while empathetic, expressed her frustrations at navigating such sensitive situations. The shop’s efforts to extend a helping hand have, more oftentimes than not, fallen on deaf ears. As she explained, many of those who approach customers aren’t interested in offers that don’t involve straight-up cash, touching on the multiple instances in which individuals, like this woman, have refused other forms of assistance.

“It’s tricky,” she said. “We live in a very broken society, and those things often show up on our doorstep.”

Which is why, she explained, Cocoa Cinnamon participates in other forms of assistance, offering “Community Coffee” for a dollar and investing in city-wide improvement programs, like the HEART Program, for example.

“It’s trained members of the community who help neighbors in a crisis, based in conflict de-escalation,” she said.

Just another one of the ways Cocoa Cinnamon seeks to give back to a community that has given so much to them.

While the business is by no means, in deGrodski’s words, “perfection,” she hopes to keep “pushing the envelope forward” and finding ways to improve both the recipes and the atmosphere.

With one of the shop’s roasters set to compete in an upcoming national coffee championship on behalf of the shop’s accompanying roastery, Little Waves, the business’ devotion to continual improvement is evident. And the results speak for themselves.

Most recently named [Roast Magazine’s 2022 Micro Roaster of the Year](#), deGrodski’s shop continues to uphold a standard of excellence.

While Cocoa Cinnamon’s vision remains the same, its goals and aspirations continue to expand beyond the community of Durham. Without a doubt, the shop’s Bull City roots will always shine through, despite its continued growth. Whether a steaming latte, or a sweet-and-savory churro, each sip and each bite is a small reminder of the power of community.