

## COMMUNITY IS BREWING AT SIP & SONDER

By Darlene Donloe

Seven years ago, Amanda-Jane Thomas and Shanita Nicholas, Ivy League-educated lawyers grinding in round-the-clock jobs, sat on a New York City rooftop to discuss what was missing from their lives.

“We were co-workers at a corporate law firm,” Thomas said. “But we knew the law wasn’t the be-all and end-all. It didn’t nourish our souls.”

For both women, moments of understanding often came over a cup of coffee, and soon they realized it was a common denominator in their lives – not just the drink, but its role in daily rituals that bring people respite and togetherness. And, they realized, it could be a great business.

“Coffee is how I experience the world around me,” Nicholas said. “It’s a keystone in my life.” Thomas agreed, adding: “It’s hard to think of a commodity that has that same impact.”

Choosing Inglewood as the locale for their first brick-and-mortar coffee shop was intentional. The City is booming, in the middle of an economic and lifestyle renaissance, and its leadership and population are Black and Latino.

“The city reflects who we are. It feels like the home we grew up in,” Nicholas said. “The vibrancy and commitment of the community is palpable. There is an Inglewood pride. It didn’t feel like a choice. This is home.”

The new sports and entertainment district has brought new customers to its doors, and the proposed Inglewood Transportation Connector (ITC), an automated people mover, is poised to bring even more.

When Nicholas and Thomas, who both live in Leimert Park, first heard about the ITC project, they decided to keep an open mind, seeing a potential benefit to the downtown business district.

“In theory, a large development has the potential to have a measurable impact,” said Thomas. “What is it going to bring, and will it build up the community? That’s the question.”

“We want an engaged downtown that is focused on Black and brown ownership,” Nicholas said. “If the project is going to help make Inglewood a place for Black and brown people to thrive, I’m for it.”

Sip & Sonder, located on Market Street, is now one of the Black-owned businesses slowly gaining fame for shaping small business culture, in a city bursting with Black entrepreneurship. For city leaders, the coffeehouse and coffee roastery have become a model of where they hope Inglewood is headed, with the addition of other similarly creative brands.

“Sip & Sonder represents all that Inglewood can and should be,” said Mayor James T. Butts. They bring quality, ingenuity, and community to their enterprise. We’ve been thrilled to see Ms.

Nicholas and Ms. Thomas make Inglewood their home base, and we know they will continue to thrive.”

Thomas and Nicholas named their coffeehouse Sip & Sonder because of the latter’s definition. It means: “the realization that each random passerby is living a life as vivid and complex as your own,” according to The Dictionary of Obscure Sorrows.

And they like alliteration.

“Our coffeehouses are hubs where creatives, entrepreneurs, freelancers, curators, and everyone in between can simply exist, grab a cup of coffee, connect, create, and put sonder into action,” Thomas said.

The cafe was designed to feel like a home away from home, where the baristas serve “out-of-this-world coffee,” as well as teas and pastries to customers who can hunker down and stay as long as they please.

“That’s exactly what we were going for, and it’s exactly what people get when they come through our doors,” said Thomas.

In addition to the shop, the Market Street location houses an event space with regular programming that includes gallery exhibits, meditation events, and A Jazz Night.

“Our goal was never to have a singular space,” Nicholas said. “We have an outpost downtown, in collaboration with the Music Center in front of Walt Disney Concert Hall, and another in the Sherman Oaks Fashion Square Mall. We also provide our signature Sip & Sonder roasted coffee to wholesale accounts including entertainment companies, hospitality, restaurants, and resorts. We also sell our coffee on [Target.com](https://www.target.com). I chuckle at how many hours we put in. It varies day-to-day. It’s hard work, but this is what we wanted.”

Not to mention that every cup of coffee at Sip & Sonder is individually crafted from beans the owners acquired from countries including Ethiopia, Papua New Guinea, Rwanda, and Colombia, and which are roasted on the premises.

“We travel around the world and actually meet the farmers so we know them personally,” Nicholas said. “The coffee is from Black countries around the world. There are Black hands picking the cherries, so it’s important for us to showcase the countries that the coffee comes from.”

Sip & Sonder’s mission, however, travels far beyond the coffeehouse and coffee roastery. Even before they opened their doors on Market Street, they formed a 501© (3) nonprofit called Sonder Impact (SI).

Sonder Impact works with nonprofit and corporate partners to develop programs with a dual focus on Black entrepreneurship and well-being.

For budding entrepreneurs, it holds “fireside chats” with speakers from various industries and intimate workshops that cover topics ranging from entity formation to finances.

In addition, SI's Brewing for Good program, launched in 2019, began donating coffee and pastries to healthcare workers on the COVID floors at Inglewood's Centinela Medical Hospital during the pandemic. Their giving to the community continues to this day.

"We were talking about the next steps we were going to take in our lives," said Nicholas, who holds a B.A. from Columbia University and a J.D./M.B.A. from Columbia Law and Business Schools.

"The first thing we came up with was the Sonder Impact," said Thomas, who holds a B.A. from Harvard College and a J.D. from Harvard Law School.

But the vision Thomas and Nicholas have for themselves goes beyond a nonprofit and a successful coffeehouse and coffee roastery. They are building a legacy.

"We want it all," said Nicholas. "We each have joy and passion for what we're doing, but this takes more than passion; it's about hustle and grit. Having all that and being a household name around the world from a company started in Inglewood by two Black women? That's what we're moving toward."

Sip & Sonder is located at 108 S Market St, Inglewood, CA 90301 and online at [SIP & SONDER \(sipandsonder.com\)](https://sipandsonder.com)