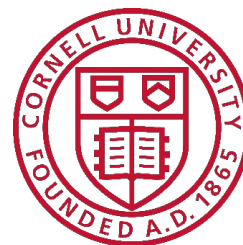


Cornell Cooperative Extension | Erie County

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John Whitney, Agriculture Educator

*This article is the third in a series focusing on vendors who are selling their wares at the Western New York Welcome Center's **Taste NY Market**. Thank you to Kerry Planck, owner/operator of Alpine Made for taking the time to share the Alpine Made story along with some marketing tips and strategies.*



Spotlight on Alpine Made

Alpine Made is a goat milk skin care product company owned and operated by Kerry Planck of Beiter & Sons' Farm in Wales, New York. Kerry describes Alpine Made as "a natural and organic soap and skincare company that supports healthy, clean and sustainable living by crafting pure, alternative products that cleanse and moisturize." Like all entrepreneurs, Kerry Planck has a great story to tell. Her web page, AlpineMade.com, describes the farm and business history, motivation, and operational details. In our discussion on a chilly November morning at Kerry's Alpine Made goat farm and skin care product plant in Wales, New York, we focused on her business development and marketing efforts for this Taste NY vendor spotlight.

Kerry doesn't have an agricultural background or education. She describes herself first and foremost as the mother of two, now teenage boys. She grew up in Binghamton, New York. She received a B.S. in aquatic plant ecology from Binghamton University and Master's degree in environmental forest biology from the College of Environmental Science and Forestry in Syracuse. She's approaching the 10 year anniversary of her starting a farm in the Erie County Town of Wales in Western New York. Her goal all along has been for the farm to be more than a hobby. Early on, she decided that goats would be a good fit for the small land base, and her interests and abilities. Kerry's earliest business plan assumed she would enter into the "food realm." The first goats and chickens arrived on the farm in 2009.

Initially, goats were sold for meat. Kerry toyed with the idea of producing goat cheese. She also began the process of, as she said, "legitimizing" the business for tax reasons, liability protection and to be better positioned to qualify for various programs including agricultural assessment, conservation grants, and business loans. She established Beiter and Sons' Farm as DBA ("doing business as") in 2009 and incorporated as Beiter and Sons' Farm LLC in 2011. Organic certification was completed in 2011 as part of starting Alpine Made. The Alpine Made DBA was set up in 2012 and the company was incorporated as an LLC (limited liability corporation) in 2014. Alpine Made is also a certified 100% woman- owned and Hispanic minority-owned business.

The \$10,000 income eligibility threshold to qualify for agricultural assessment was met by selling goat meat, chickens and eggs. She also began working with planning, mentoring and advisory organizations including [Buffalo Niagara SCORE](#), the [Buffalo District Office of the U.S. Small Business Administration](#), and [Launch NY](#), and the US Department of Agriculture's [Farm Service Agency](#) and [Natural Resources Conservation Service](#) (NRCS).

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SCORE stands for “Service Corps of Retired Executives.” It is the non-profit, volunteer-based resource partner of the U.S. Small Business Administration. SCORE provides mentoring, workshops, and educational resources and has helped more than 11 million entrepreneurs since 1964. Kerry explained that the free, confidential mentoring and planning support of the Buffalo Niagara SCORE chapter, helped her settle onto goat milk soap as her value-added product, refine her business plan, begin her branding and marketing efforts.

Kerry joined LaunchNY as part of her efforts to expand her entrepreneurial skills and to attract business investors for the next level of her business development. Under LaunchNY guidance, Kerry participated in a business pitch development competition, creating her first formal business pitch. She won a \$5,000 prize for her 4 minute pitch! Kerry said the prize money is great but importantly, she now has the foundation for a promotional pitch that she is using over and over.

Currently, two people, Kerry and her business partner, Greg Ricciardiello, run Alpine Made. They hope to bring additional part-time and full-time staff back on soon, including hiring a marketing intern. Alpine Made’s products currently include an assortment of 65 different items including goat milk soap, goat milk lotion, colostrum serum, natural salves, balms, deodorant, stain remover, beard oil, bug repellent, and more. Products are crafted and labeled in both natural and certified organic lines depending on the mix of components. One adjustment Kerry said she will be making over the coming months is to narrow the product list a bit to focus on those items that have the strongest, consistent sales and repeat customers, perhaps with seasonal adjustments but reducing the need to keep all the lines going throughout the year.

Alpine Made’s web site allows users to enter their location to find the nearest outlet for Alpine Made products. In addition to the Western New York Welcome Center’s Taste NY Market on Grand Island, the ever-expanding list of outlets currently includes many Wegmans stores and a wide variety of regional health and beauty boutiques, gift shops and specialty outlets. One unique outlet is the Darwin Martin House’s gift shop. In that outlet, Alpine Made produces a soap with a Darwin Martin House gift shop label. Still, the fine print on the back of bar references Alpine Made to maintain the brand while meeting the gift shop’s own promotional goals.

Alpine Made works with local artisans to display and sell products at art events and festivals. Farmers Markets have also been important early outlets for building brand recognition. Kerry has scaled back on the farmers market and art show venues as sales have shifted to more profitable, less time-consuming retail markets like Wegman’s. Kerry said grocery chains like Wegman’s are looking to add more locally produced lines to their retail mix. Alpine Made products are now making their way into the regional Whole Foods markets, also. Kerry sees Alpine Made products as a particularly good fit for typical Whole Food customers. Kerry said she just picked up 6 more Whole Food stores in the New Jersey/downstate New York area. She is also excited about the invitation to bring Alpine Made products into the brand new Brooklyn Wegman’s store in the next month or two.

Working with other local artisans is another of Kerry’s goals. This is especially true for adding product diversity to Alpine Made’s retail market in the old Wales Presbyterian Church that is the new home both for the production facility and Alpine Made’s retail market located at 5445 East Creek Road, South Wales, New York. The Alpine Made retail market had its grand opening on February 9, 2018. With

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operating and signage permits finally in place, the retail market and gift shop is attracting a surprising amount of business considering it is slightly off the beaten path. Kerry points out, the Wales Hollow shop is just 6 miles southeast of East Aurora and only 5 ½ miles from the Route 400 – Route 20A interchange. Kerry is very pleased with the point of sale statistics from the retail store. In just a year and one-half, the small storefront in rural Erie County has brought in \$25,000. It has quickly become an important part of Alpine Made's revenue stream with many loyal, repeat customers.

Kerry's new business partner, Greg Ricciardiello, is an experienced farmer and potter. Conveniently, he and his spouse are tenants in Kerry's old home. Kerry now lives in an apartment in the rear of the production facility and retail shop. Greg also runs an Airbnb out of Kerry's old house. Some of his pottery is sold in the retail market. Kerry expects that Greg will soon become an equity partner.

In the category of strategic alliances, Kerry is now collaborating with "[Let's Goat Buffalo](#)," Buffalo's first "goatscaping" service for managing lands in an economical, sustainable and carbon-friendly manner. During the off-season or when not out on a job site, the Let's Goat Buffalo goat herd is boarded at Beiter & Sons' Farm. Retired goats from the 30 animal milking herd and some of "the boys," as Kerry calls them, are now shifted over to the Let's Goat Buffalo landscaping herd. This has provided an alternative to sending goats off to the meat market. Boarding fees are now fully offsetting Beiter & Sons' purchased organic feed costs. Part of the arrangement with Let's Goat Buffalo is that all the landscaping goats remain part of Beiter & Sons' Farm closed herd, preventing any introduction of goats from non-organic herds and reducing the potential for bringing in difficult to control diseases and parasites.

Kerry's efforts to get her products into the larger retail markets in the region, and now even downstate are really beginning to pay off. With attractive displays to show off her products, retailers are taking full advantage of the trend of including and even featuring locally made, handcrafted products in their marketing mix. Still, Kerry is quick to point out that not every marketing effort, even with good upfront planning works out perfectly, at least in the short-term. Last year's two month commitment to participate in the New York City Union Square Holiday Market didn't produce enough sales to cover the costs and was a big factor in Alpine Made having to cut back the workforce to recover from the losses and failure to meet revenue projections. Always, an optimist though, Kerry said even that effort is having longer-term benefits in on-line sales and in helping to make the case for including Alpine Made products in downstate retail outlets due to the exposure to an expanded and diverse customer base. On-line revenues have increased by 150% in the first half of 2019, "which is huge," Kerry said.

When she visits a new store, in addition to personally describing her product line, Kerry presents a product sample kit, not unlike what another famous area soap salesman (for the Larkin Soap Company), Elbert Hubbard, used in his marketing efforts. Hubbard went on to found and operate the Roycroft artisan community in East Arora. Hubbard called his sample kits "goodie boxes." Kerry is proud to be part of the soap making legacy in Western New York. Her sample kits help sell her products almost as soon as you open the lid both through the distinctive packaging and branding and through the mix of naturally sourced fragrances that infuse her products. And for those with fragrance sensitivities or who don't want to use or mix fragrances, Alpine Made includes many fragrance-free products.

Demoing products continues to be the primary way Alpine Made promotes its products to consumers. Even with attractive end-cap displays in Wegman's and other outlets, the extra attention achieved

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through in-person demonstrations attracts new customers who might otherwise reach for big name, mass-marketed, over-the-counter and off-the-shelf synthetic products. Kerry explains it take a lot of time but that is what she needs to do to get people to try her products. Kerry estimates that over 50% of Alpine Made's first-time consumers become repeat customers, even at the locally-made, hand crafted product price point. With Alpine Made's entry into the larger retail chain markets, Kerry says she has had to back off participating in as many farmer's markets and art shows but she still participates in some and she still wants to expand sales in small gift shops and smaller outlets. Kerry says over the years she has identified those that tend to be more profitable and she's dropping out of those that tend not to have as much return on her investment of time and energy.

Like many entrepreneurs, Kerry doesn't yet take a draw on Alpine Made revenues. She rolls revenues back into paying down debt and covering developmental and operational costs. The obvious goal is to be able to pay herself and Greg out of Alpine Made profits. Her business and marketing plans are structured toward achieving that goal in the near future for both she and Greg. Kerry says, even when she and Greg are at out of town meetings with distributors and store managers or out demoing products, they frequently stay with relatives or friends to keep costs down. Alpine Made would also welcome any "angel investors" and Kerry has prepared materials to share to anyone who might be interested.

In 2018, Kerry used a USDA Farm Service Agency small business loan program to consolidate debt at a lower interest rate and to reduce her loan repayments to a more manageable, single monthly payment. A SCORE accounting mentor has been helping with business valuation and the process of planning to bring Greg in as an equity partner within the next five years. He is also helping with tax planning to be able to take advantage of tax savings, some of which may have been missed without the guidance of an outside specialist over the years. NRCS conservation programs have also provided valuable technical and financial support for the farm side of Kerry's operations.

Kerry now uses a professional web page developer to prepare and maintain her web page. While that is another business expense, the results are evident both in the quality of the page and in the ease of use for those exploring the web page or considering on-line purchasing. The page also helps direct potential customers to the closest retail outlets for Alpine Made products. An earlier business web page for Beiter and Sons's Farm remains active but is now linked to the new page so that search engines help users find Alpine made in a variety of ways. Kerry says that once you build quality content on the internet, you really shouldn't take it off. Kerry explained that you just want to link to it so that internet search engine optimization finds you in a variety of ways and brings you up closer to the top of the list. That's part of the reason Alpine Made comes up among the top links in web searches for goat milk soap.

Social media is also an important part of Alpine Made's marketing. The [Alpine Made Facebook](#) page has many loyal followers with enticing, frequently updated content and event notices. The Facebook page currently has nearly 2500 likes and followers. With no current, separate marketing budget, Kerry takes advantage of the free services: Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. That's mainly how she keeps in touch with her customer base and promotes her products beyond store displays and demoing. She also regularly tags back to the sites of other vendors to help spread the word about product availability and marketing events as well as to support other local artisans.

Kerry and Alpine Made have won a number of awards. Alpine made received the Small Business Administration Buffalo District Home-Based Business of the Year award in 2016. Kerry also received Buffalo/Niagara SCORE's 2016 Success Story award.

Kerry hasn't created a separate marketing plan. That may be a job for the new marketing intern. Still, she incorporates marketing in her business plan and in the business' executive summary.

Have you heard of (or experienced) "goat yoga?" That's another way Kerry has brought attention to and diversified the operation. She even had a shout-out from Buffalo Mayor, Byron Brown, after he and his wife recently participated in a goat yoga session at Alpine Made and Beiter & Sons' Farm. To help support the goat yoga experience, Kerry has shifted the goat breeding and kidding seasons to twice per year so that there are always younger goats around both for goat yoga events and for visitors who would like to be able to interact with the younger goats.

Kerry says she owns and operates three businesses, a schedule C (sole proprietor), a schedule E (rental) and a schedule F (farm). She currently owns 15 acres in three tax parcels in her own name. It all gets pretty complicated but it is part of the process of developing a successful enterprise and it is all working out, including being a mom and striving for balance in her life.

The old church sanctuary is now insulated with the help of a New York State Energy Research and Development Authority ([NYSERDA](#)) weatherization grant. This will allow Alpine Made to expand its programming and marketing mix to include workshops and year-round activities related to the goal of promoting Alpine Made products and as Kerry describes, "healthy, clean and sustainable living." Kerry hopes you will visit her web page and social media sites, stop by some of the many retail outlets, and visit her Wales Hollow farm store regularly.

Thanks to Kerry Planck for visiting with me to complete this Taste NY spotlight interview during this busy time of the year. I have personally known Kerry since she moved to Western New York and started her farming operation nearly 10 years ago. It is inspiring to see how far she has come in her business development and expertise.



Taste NY at the Western New York
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