



[Lisa you are an null level member.](#)

SUPPORT US

FREE NEWSLETTER

## BUSINESSES

# Kentucky Proud businesses vie for space on Kroger shelves

By [LISA HORNING](#) | August 30, 2018 9:00 am



Amy Henson, a London, Ky., optometrist, goat farmer and entrepreneur, represents Rock Bottom Soap Co. at the Kroger Kentucky Proud Show Wednesday at the Gheens Lodge

## at Parklands at Floyds Fork. | Photo by Lisa Hornung

Amy Henson grew up loving horses. She always knew she would own them, but horses are expensive, and she had to earn enough money to keep them.

As an adult, she became an optometrist and bought a farm and horses: Dream achieved. But when one mare wasn't able to provide milk to its newborn foal, a vet suggested goat's milk as a great way to feed babies in emergencies.

"So, I didn't know anything about goats, but I said, 'Let me get some goats to try to save my future horses if we have this problem again,' " she said, adding that becoming a goat farmer was "a huge learning curve. And I had a freezer full of milk."

She didn't want the milk to go to waste, and she couldn't find anyone to take it. Armed with her biology and chemistry degree, she did some research and learned about soapmaking.

Mr. G's Kettle Corn was created by Greg Reece, a former truck driver who would, on the weekends, create and sell kettle corn at festivals. | Photo by Lisa Hornung

"The first batch was great. The second batch was a disaster," Henson said. "Then I was just mad, so I had to keep doing it."

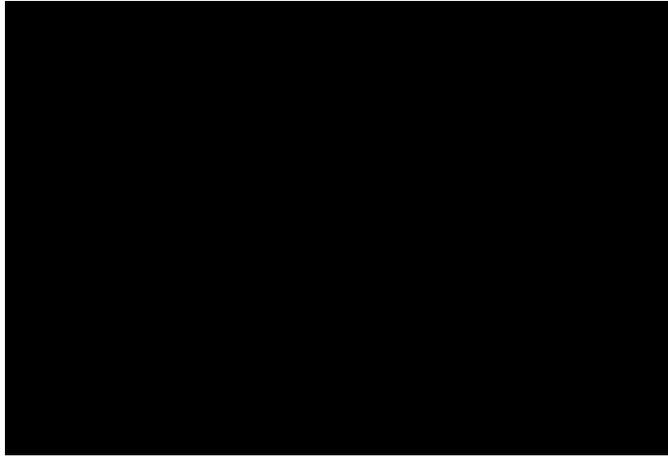
She created [Rock Bottom Soap Co.](#), and began selling soaps at craft fairs on the weekends, and it became a nice side gig to use up the goat milk she had on hand. Then, she got a letter from Kroger and Kentucky Proud.

## Getting into Kroger

Initially, Henson dismissed it. "I thought, 'No, Kroger is not interested in me. I don't make a food product,'" Henson said.

In 2014, she got a call from Steve Smith, owner of the Louisville-based meat and specialty foods distributor [Fishmarket](#), who was organizing a food show for Kroger and Kentucky Proud. He encouraged her to bring her soaps to the event, Henson recalled, because Kroger was looking to expand its local selections to soaps, lotions and beauty products.

“We got on the first round of the [Kentucky Proud](#) rack, and that first order was huge,” Henson said. “It was the biggest order my company has ever had. We were not prepared for that!”



Tracy Grizzle, right, a manager at the Clifton Kroger, expressed her delight with [DB Bourbon Candy](#), based in Frankfort, Ky. The candy company’s founder and owner Robyn Stuart, left, has had her candy at the Oscars, the Emmys and even at a Congressional Black Caucus dinner that former President Barack Obama attended. | Photo by Lisa Hornung

“So we buckled down, and all my friends and family were working until two or three in the morning to meet the deadline and get it out. We lived through that, and we’ve been on the Kroger rack ever since, and it’s helped grow our business. It’s just great to be in Kroger and have the recognition of the Kentucky Proud line.”

Henson and other Kentucky business owners were selling their products at the Kentucky Proud Show Wednesday at the Gheens Lodge at Parklands at Floyds Fork. The show is in its

fourth year, and Smith, an organizer of the event, said he's very happy with the results.

"You gotta give Kroger credit for this really," Smith said. "Because look at this: This is a national company. This is a food show for local vendors, and look at their participation. Honestly, that is amazing. You don't get this from other large retailers, you just don't. The bottom line is they made the commitment to do this and asked us to participate in it and get it going, and it's just grown exponentially every year."

Smith, who owns Fishmarket with his twin brother Brad Smith, began the business in 1988 with his father. His grandfather had been a frozen foods distributor, and now Brad Smith's son is also in the business.

## Local sells

Businesses set up booths at the Wednesday event to show their products to Kroger management throughout the state, offer samples and give information with the goal of getting their products onto Kroger shelves. There were about 50 vendors on hand; 14 of them were new and looking to get into their first Kroger stores.

Managers have some control over the items in their store displays, and they were able to provide feedback and vote for their top three vendors at the event, but most of the decision-making is based on customer-loyalty data, said Jere Downs, associate communications manager for Kroger's Louisville division.

"We know what our customers want, and we're gonna give it to them," she said. If certain items sell better in some locations, then the stores can adjust accordingly.

Sales of local products in Kentucky, Indiana and Illinois have increased 4 percent annually, a very healthy rate, Downs said.

Kroger managers from Louisville sampled foods and other Kentucky Proud products at the Kentucky Proud Food Show at Floyds Fork. | Photo by Lisa Hornung

Since launching the Kentucky Proud display racks in 2014, Kroger sales of locally grown, produced and manufactured merchandise by farm families and producers have grown steadily from about \$715,000 to \$1.1 million each year and more in 2018. Kroger carries more than 100 Kentucky Proud products in its grocery section alone from more than 50 independent vendors.

This year, Kroger is launching a new Kentucky Proud rack specifically for beauty products in Kroger stores. A large portion of the vendors at the event, like Henson, make soaps, lotions and lip balms.

Although Henson sort of fell into the soap business, she sees her role as more than just a goat farmer, and she hasn't been able to quit optometry yet.

"I still have a day job, which I love, but my heart is truly on that farm with my animals," she said. "So many people are away from the farm now, so I think it's important to show that 'Hey, a farm did this. We raised this animal, we milked it, and this is what they can do.' I love that part of it. My heart's always been in farming; I just had to find a way to finance it."

## **LISA HORNUNG**

Lisa Hornung a native of Louisville and has worked in local media for more than 15 years as a writer and editor. Before that she worked as a writer, editor and photographer for community newspapers in Kansas, Ohio and Kentucky. She has a bachelor's degree in journalism from the University of Georgia, and after a 20-year career in journalism, she obtained a master's degree in history from Eastern Kentucky University in 2016.



**Institute for  
Nonprofit News**

Copyright © 2019 Insider Media Group, Inc., All Rights Reserved.