



February Business Highlight
Grandma's Gourmets
Albert Lea, Minnesota

Nestled in a commercial kitchen and warehouse space in Albert Lea, you will find a unique food manufacturer-- Grandma's Gourmets. The sweet smells of cinnamon, lemon and apple juice wafts out of the kitchen. They're making a cinnamon, apple and whiskey jelly, one of their new artisanal products. If you go to their website, www.grandmasgourmets.com, you will find this introduction: "Grandma's Gourmets is focused on providing unique products that are a blend of memories, contemporary flavors and high quality ingredients, many sourced locally. From our Bloody Pickles to Road Rage Jam and to our Grandma's Dills, we provide amazing flavors to discerning customers; we produce the highest quality of gourmet foods made in small, artisan batches just as if grandma made them, because she did."



Photo by Red Bird Hills, courtesy of Southern Minnesota Initiative Foundation

Kim Olson has an interesting story to tell. Back in 1977, using preserving techniques learned from her mother and her Great-Grandma Woods' recipes, she made jam for the county fair. She began to develop her own flavors and styles. She uses her Great-Grandma's farmhouse pickle recipe from the 1890s, and "hopes to do her grandmother justice".



Faced with a career change, Olson found Vocational Rehabilitation Services in 2009. She was able to complete a Business degree at Riverland College. With her education, her food knowledge and a desire to create, she started out with farmer's markets, rendezvous events in 10+states and catering. While attending a regional women's workshop, she shared a table with a local

marketing expert, who encouraged her to go for it, and she has.

Olson believes in local sourcing and has an ever-growing list of family, friends and others within the region who supply her fresh produce needs. She uses local businesses for marketing and packaging materials. She tests out new products with families and friends. She and her staff of six (which includes three demonstrators in the metro area) strive to find the best ingredients, to create amazing flavors and to deliver a quality product.

Creating unique flavors and quality are her focus and are setting her apart. She traveled last month to San Francisco, where she received a Good Food 2019 award for her Strawberry Balsamic Black Pepper jam. In 2018, she was recognized with a Good Food award for her Bloody Pickles. Olson believes that her Bloody Pickles are possibly “one of a kind”; she calls it just like a Bloody Mary without the vodka! Grandma’s Gourmets’ Bloody Pickle was one of 15 winners in the pickle category across the United States.

Olson also won a 2017 Good Food Award for her Spicy Maple Bread and Butter Pickles. Even submitting a pickle for the award can be quite a process, Olson states. The Good Food Awards put an emphasis on local and sustainable food. She has been recognized by The Feast Festival in Rochester with a process award for her innovative local sourcing. Other honors include recognition for her salsa with a Texas-based Fiery Food award.

Olson recently received a local Tiger Cage financial award, which is similar to the popular ABC “Shark Tank” program. ALEAP is an initiative sponsored by the Albert Lea Economic Development Agency (ALEDA) and local businesses. This funding will help Olson move toward her next goal, which is to assist other small food manufacturers with co-packing and labeling.



When asked what advice she would have given herself back in 2009, Olson responded immediately with, “Take more chances, go gangbusters and do it! Join associations and take advantage of educational opportunities. And--consider getting loans.” She also wants to thank her supporters, which include her family, SMIF, her business coach, Renewing the Countryside organization and members. She also gives credit to Mariah Lynne, Jeff Thorstad and Northern Label Company, among others.

Grandma’s Gourmets products can be found at Hy-Vee stores (both in the 10 county SE MN area and in the metro), food co-ops, and specialty sections of other businesses. And just for fun, here is a number to think about: Last season, the Grandma’s Gourmets team hand-produced 5,000 lbs of cucumbers into pickles! For more information, check out her website, www.grandmasgourmets.com.

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