

Real Straw(s) made right here in WNY

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Funny how a little thing can become a big thing. Like many of life's turning points, it started innocently enough. A little over a year ago, just relaxing, reading the Sunday Buffalo News.

My sweet wonderful beautiful darling Christina, just down the couch from me, called my attention to a TV news story. The story related how a paper drink straw company is working to replace those nasty plastic straws that pop out of sea turtles' noses.

As a beach bartender for eight of my forty years behind a bar, my fingerprints may be on some of those awful straws.

Consider: A guy takes a drink from the bar to his boat at Sunset Bay. The straw falls in the water, and away it floats. Across the lake, down the river, over Niagara Falls, and slowly it turns.

Years later, the taste of frosty, cool, and refreshing frozen strawberry daiquiri faded into oblivion, up the sea turtle's nose it goes. Sorry dude.

Thinking about that unfortunate chain of events, I decided to take action. I contacted the paper drink straw company, figuring I could help (and make a few bucks) by promoting and selling their paper straws. As it turns out, US made, high-quality paper straws are relatively expensive, so I decided to explore other options.

I considered selling corn-based plastic straws, but they seemed like a very complex tool for a simple sipping operation. Made from extruded corn goop, PLA straws are not nearly as biodegradable as other options.

Then, I came across wheat drink straws, and my life changed, bigly. I discovered interesting tidbits. Wheat straws are actually just pieces of wheat stem, cut, cleaned, and dried. Even though they are wheat, wheat stems are naturally gluten free, as the gluten in wheat is concentrated in the seed head and not in the stem.

In short order, wheat swept me off my feet. Things got a little crazy in a big hurry. I started a company, created a website, imported a bunch of straws for a starting inventory, and then realized I needed to do one more thing.



I needed to organically grow wheat drink straws right here in Western New York.

So, I bought ten acres of land, and called the experts at Cornell Cooperative Extension. They provided sage (and free) advice.

Starting small, I figured I would plant about one third of an acre of spring wheat in spring 2019, which would give me enough to perfect the straw manufacturing process.

Acquiring equipment was interesting. I consummated a deal for a rototiller in the parking lot of a fast food joint in Erie, PA. The rototiller's previous owner, a sturdy guy in a late model pickup truck, helped me squeeze the machine into the hatch of my Nissan Juke. I smelled the machine up close for ninety miles, thanking my guardian angel for guiding and protecting me on my journey.

Over the next few weeks, I grew more adept at harnessing the power of six horses, and the rototiller churned about a third of an acre of grass-free dirt. The area was once, and will be again, a snowmobile trail. (That is called crop rotation.)

On planting day, I managed to get the seeds into the moist earth. The day after sowing it snowed, and then it rained almost every day for the next month. Total crop failure.

Where was I going to get a wheat stem supply? Commercial wheat harvesting destroys the stems during processing, so that was not an option.

A thought occurred to me. I ventured into Amish country, where they harvest their wheat with century-old reaper/binders. Cruising the back roads of WNY, I stopped at an Amish farm that offered jams for sale. The family there happened to know of a nearby farmer who was growing spelt, an ancient variety of wheat.



Amish
grown spelt drying in a sun-drenched field in Leon, NY.

That farm was run by three generations of Amish folks, living in two well-built houses separated by a stone driveway. After I told the farmer what I was up to, he agreed to sell me some of his straws, come harvest time.

A couple months later, the farmer called from his neighbor's phone, and we arranged for a date where I could pick up the straw. On that date, several of the farmer's eight kids formed a line and conveyed the bundled wheat from one side of the barn to my makeshift processing station.

Armed with a battery operated hedge trimmer, I lopped off the seed heads, and handed the shorn bundles to a friend I had brought along to help load the rented moving truck.



Since that day, I have been processing and marketing the straws. Next year should be easier, as I have already planted a couple acres of winter wheat to supply next year's straws. To help better process the straws, I am working with a prototype to product program for startups, based in Ithaca, NY.

Marketing the straws is interesting. When I walk in to a place with samples, customers and staff love them.

Owners sometimes balk at the price. They can buy plastic straws two for a penny. The problem with plastic straws is that there is no environmental cost charged to the consumer. That's what got us into this mess.

Wheat stems are three cents per straw, two and half cents for stir sticks. The truth is, at either price, straws are not a big investment. Three cents in a five dollar cocktail? A wheat straw costs less than a cocktail olive, about the same cost as a maraschino cherry.

Wheat straws are not perfect. If you pinch them too hard, they will break. Education at the point of sale is crucial. I tell people to treat their Real Straw like they would the person serving them. Do not pinch them, and you will both get along fine.

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