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Gear companies go local

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Timm Smith has been in the outdoor gear industry for a decade – just long enough to see one scrappy, independent company after another surrender to the kind of corporatization they once scorned. SmartWool apparel may still be based in Steamboat Springs, Colorado, but in 2005 it was bought by Timberland, which was bought by VF Corporation, which also owns The North Face and has an investor line-up that reads like a who's who of Wall Street. Yoga-and-climbing brand PrAna was recently acquired by Columbia Sportswear, along with Mountain Hardwear, Sorel and Montrail. Utah-based Black Diamond, once peddled from the back of a car, just turned a \$40-million profit by selling Gregory packs to luggage giant Samsonite. And so on. "It seemed to me that many companies outgrew what they stood for," says Smith, 34. "(The industry) had become very much about turning the crank and running products on the Asian superhighway."

So in 2012, a disillusioned Smith quit his job at Gore-Tex and moved from urban Maryland to Pagosa Springs, Colorado, a town of 1,700 on the southern flanks of the San Juan Mountains. He took a marketing job with an idealistic startup called Voormi, which pledges to manufacture its outerwear in the U.S. and buy only Rocky Mountain wool. And though it has just seven employees so far, co-founder Dan English hopes that by headquartering in a small town, Voormi can help stem the tide of talent flowing from the rural to the urban West. "We wanted to be super authentic," English says, of his move from Boulder to Pagosa. "There's no major interstates here, no major airports. Part of being an authentic brand is living the lifestyle that we preach."

Voormi and other niche gear companies – like Duckworth, a Bozeman-based clothing brand that buys only Montana wool, or Meier Skis, a Colorado ski manufacturer that uses locally harvested aspen and beetle-kill pine – hope to leverage that "authenticity" to compete with far bigger rivals. They're banking on the rise of microbreweries and farmers' markets as evidence that some Americans are willing to pay more for quality local goods, and they're already having an impact on small towns, sheep ranchers – even machine salesmen. "If you look at consumer trends, you're seeing a return to people caring about the stories behind things and where the things they buy come from," Smith says. "What happened with craft beer is an interesting model."

There's just one caveat: Outdoor gear ain't beer, and the very isolation and rugged terrain that allow Voormi's testers to head straight out the door and into the mountains has caused other companies to go under entirely – or outgrow and abandon their rural birthplaces. "Made in (small-town) Colorado" is a great marketing strategy for breaking into the \$120 billion-a-year outdoor industry. But can it sustain a business for the long haul?





Some Colorado companies, like Scott Fly Rods in Montrose, have succeeded by making a product so specialized it can't (yet) be outsourced. Others, like Melanzana – which has been making super-soft fleece sweatshirts in Leadville for 20 years – simply reject the "grow-at-all-costs" philosophy. As if to flaunt its stubborn independence, Melanzana is named for the Italian word for eggplant, because according to the company's website, the vegetable represents "the exact opposite of every ultra-cool outdoor clothing company named for an exotic mountain locale, imposing rock face, or ancient Tibetan rite."

Founder Fritz Howard isn't making a killing by sourcing, sewing and distributing under one roof in a high-altitude old mining town, but that's OK with him – and with Melanzana's loyal following, who see it as one of the few brands that haven't sold out. "We're authentic without having to say we are," Howard says. "I just wanted to live in a mountain town and do my own thing, really."

Five hours southwest in the town of Cortez, Osprey Packs has managed to compete globally while remaining locally rooted. Mike Pfothenhauer moved the company from California to Colorado in the early '90s, but by 2003 it had outgrown those digs, and Pfothenhauer began outsourcing manufacturing to Vietnam. The company's design hub is now in Marin County, California – which offers a larger creative pool – and it'll soon move distribution to Salt Lake City to be on the national railroad network and reduce Osprey's carbon footprint.

But Pfothenhauer remains committed to Cortez. The company employs about 75 people in the town of 8,500, and he and his wife just moved back there. And though he's had plenty of offers to sell, Pfothenhauer has turned each one down. "I think we remain strong by remaining independent of the typical corporate system," he says. "You have to be wary of opportunities from the outside."

