

# ALPACA CULTURE

A young brown alpaca is the central focus of the image, sitting in a field of dry, golden-brown grass. The alpaca is looking towards the left side of the frame. Its fur is thick and curly. The background is slightly blurred, showing more of the same grassy field.

December 2017

**National  
Alpaca  
Farm Days**

Alpaca farmers  
welcome the public





BEN KORNOWSKI / ALPACA TO APPAREL

# ALPACA TO AMERICAN ALPACA FARMERS AND A PERUVIAN DESIGNER JOIN FORCES APPAREL:

BY MEYLA BIANCO JOHNSTON

## FIRST, There Were Animals at the American Family Farm

Alpaca to Apparel started just how it sounds.

The first part of the venture was focused on the animals themselves, as many alpaca ventures are. Owner Ben Kornowski says Alpaca to Apparel was founded in 2008 when they purchased their first Huacaya alpacas.

There is also a family element to the beginning of their story. When Kornowski's grandfather passed away, his great aunt Judy Vincent and great grandma Phyllis Olson moved onto his grandma Paula DeJardin's farm, about a mile from his parents' farm.

Breeding alpacas truly started the Alpaca to Apparel venture. "In 2010, my grandma and I purchased two breeding alpacas to have babies and keep our herd growing. Shortly after this, we began to sell alpaca clothing at farmer's markets and in a Christmas store on grandma's farm which my great grandma worked in during the week while I was in high school."

A family of persistent matriarchs then created something bigger than themselves, with great grandma Olsen's tenacity leading the way. Kornowski says she kept it up until she was 95 years old when she finally decided to put her feet up.

## THEN the Farmers Sold Alpaca Fiber Goods and Became Store Owners

From breeding, the company expanded to selling alpaca goods from brick and mortar locations.

At this point, they moved the farm store to Kornowski's parents' farm. Now they operate two

successful stores in Northeast Wisconsin.

Alpaca to Apparel is not exclusively a retail or a wholesale business at this time – they are listening to feedback to help determine their path forward. "We are now offering wholesale because of the numerous requests we had from visitors to our stores," Kornowski says. "Above offering products, we also offer firsthand knowledge about the alpaca industry and selling alpaca products retail."

So customers get the full experience, just as the company name implies. This cohesive picture adds to customers' experiences and ultimately, knowledge about alpacas.

The Alpaca to Apparel website explains that the company "strives to offer the most unique styles in luxurious baby alpaca fiber to retail partners across the country." Their styles are designed to highlight the excellence of alpaca as a material.

"At Alpaca to Apparel, we use that highest amount of the highest quality alpaca possible," Kornowski says. "This means that if we have the option to use 100% baby alpaca or a lesser quality material, we opt for the 100% baby alpaca. The quality of the alpaca is the most important part of the equation."

"Our styles help people fall in love with alpaca as a material."

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**Opposite:** The Sofia Coat by Alpaca to Apparel. This hand knit garment uses a special yarn that gives the illusion that it is fur. However, it is actually made of 70% baby alpaca, 7% Merino, and 23% polyamide. The coat is 100% hand knit with a popcorn stitch that contrasts with the flat but stepped knitting of the rest of the garment. "The circle and stick closure can be moved and adjusted to wherever the person wearing it sees fit," Ben Kornowski explains.

## MEANWHILE, in Peru . . .

Evelyn Monteza started her business in her home country of Peru where she worked her way through design school. She believes this prepared her for the high stakes fashion world. "In fashion school, I had the opportunity to control creative ideas so that the design can have a balance between innovative and commercial," Monteza says.

"At the time I was studying, I had the opportunity to work with artisans and see the potential of using alpaca fiber," she explains.

Monteza was ready to show the world this beauty and strength and she decided to work with Peruvian artisans to most effectively showcase the wonderful qualities of alpaca fiber. This goal also included ensuring that the artisans got a square deal for their efforts.

While her homeland of Peru is central to her work, and she lives and works there, Monteza does not necessarily base her designs on her geographic location but rather on something more universal – her outlook is definitely global.

"The collections are aimed at people from all over the

world who feel the same spirit and recognize themselves in the garments as a second skin."

In order to promote her designs, Monteza has attended Peru Moda every year since 2011 and considers it the most important exhibition of alpaca fiber and Pima cotton.

Alpaca as a material is just as important to Alpaca to Apparel as the animals themselves are.

Soft and light, strong and insulative, alpaca fiber is one of the most versatile and luxurious natural fibers on earth. She emphasizes that alpaca fiber is "cool to the touch and fresh on the skin, maintaining body heat by protecting from the cold up to seven times more than the wool of sheep."

Monteza says, "we contact customers from all over the world who specifically look for a high quality fiber as well as an innovative design." And that's exactly what Monteza creates.

Because of these savvy global consumers, searching for the most beautiful design constructed from the most beautiful, eco-friendly material available, Monteza says orders allow her "to have an export agenda for the whole year."

## THEN the Store Owners Met An International Designer

The Alpaca to Apparel relationship with Evelyn Monteza officially began when Kornowski met Monteza's husband Javier on a trip to Peru. It was pure serendipity.

Javier was eager to show the talent of his wife, a successful designer and like so many Peruvians, jumped right in with a friendly and enthusiastic presentation.

"When [Javier] showed us [Evelyn's] designs and clothing, we knew from the beginning that they were special," Kornowski says. "We purchased a couple garments for our store and despite that slightly higher price than items that we were used to selling, these items sold quickly."

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The Alpaca to Apparel team posing in the latest Alpaca to Apparel styles at the counter that Ben's dad Charles Kornowski created to look like stacked bee boxes in their barn store in Wisconsin. Ben and his grandma Paula DeJardin stand in front of the counter and Ben's mom Kelly Kornowski and his great grandma Phyllis Olson stand behind it.

ANDREW KORNOWSKI / ALPACA TO APPAREL





**“OUR MAIN PRIORITY IS TO MAINTAIN FAIR TRADE. THIS WAS THE GOAL FROM THE BEGINNING. WE DO NOT ALLOW IT TO CHANGE, DESPITE THE PRESSURE OF THE LOW PRICES OF SOME COUNTRIES THAT EXPLOIT MEN, WOMEN AND CHILDREN.”**

~ EVELYN MONTEZA

“Later, we met with Evelyn, and after a cup of coffee, we knew that we wanted to work together exclusively.” Now, Alpaca to Apparel and Monteza offer an exclusive line of hand-knit products. The partnership has proven to be very successful and unique. Evelyn Monteza now creates exclusive designs for Alpaca to Apparel each year.

Kornowski says he and his team are “honored to work with Evelyn.” He believes her designs are “what sets our company apart from the rest. When customers wear Evelyn’s pieces, it is like wearing a piece of art.”

“Evelyn’s designs are trendy yet classic. She uses classic patterns in new contemporary styles that people of all ages can appreciate. She is working on the hand-knit collections but is also putting a new focus on minimalist styles. These styles are thinner and more basic. These styles are excellent for summer evenings and in the fall or spring. Evelyn has an eye that allows her to create the best designs available.”

## **DEVOTED** to Giving Peruvian Artisans a Fair Deal

Truly inspired design and consumer-friendly styles may have been successful on their own, but Monteza brings more. She believes in empowering the artisan women of her neighborhood. Incredibly, this is not the norm.

“We work with women from vulnerable communities,” Monteza explains. By creating



BEN KORNOWSKI / ALPACA TO APPAREL

Ben’s sister Emmalee Kornowski is a sophomore at the University of Wisconsin at Green Bay and is currently studying to become a mortician. She is not just the Alpaca to Apparel model – she keeps horses on the family farm and also helps in the store when she is available. Emmalee is wearing the Mood Coat, which is lightweight and warm. It is composed of 90% baby alpaca and 10% nylon in the style of a cape with a drawstring closure. The bright red flare of this piece against the black background was designed to recall the impression of leaf veins.

handmade garments they are able to attend to their family responsibilities while earning money. Monteza makes sure that “women are continuously trained in both knitting and domestic techniques.” She notes that Alpaca to Apparel garments reflect the spirit of each knitter in the completed pieces.

Monteza knew from experience that the artisans could provide truly exceptional work and design details that would benefit her brand. She was also aware as a member of the fashion community that “innovative design stimulates the

## OUR STYLES HELP PEOPLE FALL IN LOVE WITH ALPACA AS A MATERIAL.

buyer.” Her goal was for the garments to benefit people all the way from the artisan down to the final consumer.

“Evelyn brings exclusive designs to the Alpaca to Apparel brand,” Kornowski says.

But she does more than that with her goals for the women working with her.

“Wearing a garment produced by Evelyn Monteza or any Alpaca to Apparel product means that you are helping the people who produced the product. Evelyn has many women who hand-knit garments for her,” Kornowski says.

“The best part of working for Evelyn as a knitter is that the women get paid a fair wage. Alpaca to Apparel is concerned about the people who produce products for us and we only work with producers that treat their employees well. You can see the happiness of the knitters expressed in the quality of their work.”

Monteza is mindful of the needs of her workforce. “Our main priority is to maintain fair trade,” she says. “This was the goal from the beginning. We do not allow it to change, despite the pressure of the low prices of some countries that exploit men, women and children.”

“For that reason, we keep the payment greater than the law requires us to,” in order for the situation to be “fair, real and convenient for those who do this work,” Monteza says.

She says that this allows the weavers to take care of their children and families because they are asked to weave for just four or five hours a day as opposed to the eight other companies ask for. Weaving for eight hours a day is too much; it causes eye strain and stress.

Monteza and her artisans value quality, comfort, style, and warmth as much as you do. This is evident in the unique handcrafted, hand-crocheted, hand-finished, and hand-inspected Alpaca to Apparel designs they produce.



Ben says, “Each Alpaca to Apparel garment is named after someone, and the 100% baby alpaca, hand-knit Paula Cardigan displays the characteristics of my grandmother; it is soft and warm. It is also simple and brings back the days when life was easier.”


BEN KORNOWSKI / ALPACA TO APPAREL

“Hand-knit designs result in a different garment,” Monteza says. “It offers luxury to the consumer and a better quality of life to the artisan.” She also points out the “exquisite texture and expression that can be felt in a handmade garment like brush strokes in a painting that can express joy, excitement or anger.”

Besides design skill, Monteza is also adept at managing people. She believes it is important to hear the concerns of her artisans and to keep communication open. “Listening, observing and asking are the best ways to grow and improve the design and finishes of the garments.”

Today the team of Evelyn Monteza and Alpaca to Apparel are gaining traction and customers. Recently, Monteza showed her fashion at PeruModa. Soon, they will start producing the collection for the 2018 season.

From North America, a family of farmers led by one tenacious Grandma eventually became store owners. Who would have imagined that from Wisconsin, through fate, they teamed up with a talented designer from South America determined to give her countrywomen a fair shake in business?

The result of the cross-continental synergy echoes the Alpaca to Apparel tagline: “From Grazing to Amazing.” 

See the latest collection and learn more at: [www.alpacatoapparel.com](http://www.alpacatoapparel.com).

Watch the video of Monteza’s styles on the catwalk by going to [www.alpacaculture.com](http://www.alpacaculture.com) > Magazine > Videos.

### SOURCES:

- Personal interview Ben Kornowski.
- Personal interview Evelyn Monteza.





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# Innovations

## Charity Edition

This time of year is about sharing, joy, and a certain open-heartedness. As sojourning family members return to home base, we feast and celebrate, reflect on the past year and make family bonds stronger.

As we come together, why not also help those in need beyond the borders of our own home countries? Through the simple act of gifting the items showcased here, you can make a difference in the world.

We salute the generous companies who give a part of their profit to help others avoid hunger, illness and prejudice. By offering others a helping hand toward self-reliance, they are able to lift themselves up, too.



### Lanart Huacaya Alpaca Felted Sculptures

Throughout the holiday season, Lanart donates proceeds from the sale of these charming felted Huacaya alpacas to the Santa Barbara Cancer Research Center. This “mecha” or roving yarn critter, is a darling addition to your home all year-long. Made entirely by hand, each stands about 4 inches tall – perfect on your mantle or nestled among the branches of your holiday tree. Includes a loop for hanging and has ear holes for custom decoration. Opt for the extra optional chullo hat for maximum charm! Buy them at [www.lanart.net](http://www.lanart.net).

### Tall Zinnia Seeds, Baker Creek Heirloom Seeds

Based in rural Missouri, Baker Creek is dedicated to helping those far away from the Heartland. When you buy these beautiful zinnia seeds, you contribute to an equally beautiful concept of giving back. Proceeds from the sale of these seeds and other rare flower and vegetable varieties go toward helping the victims of the virulent 2017 hurricane season. Besides donating money, Baker Creek is also sending seeds to El Departamento De la Comida in San Juan, Puerto Rico, to help rebuild the organic food system on the island. They are also donating home garden restart kits to those who have lost their gardens to these horrific storms. Visit [www.rareseeds.org](http://www.rareseeds.org) to learn more about their generous programs and to shop for next year's garden.

