

# Bee Free: A Health Food Brand Born to Help Win the Fight for Autism

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## KEYWORDS

- Third-Party Certification
- Bee Free
- Gluten-Free
- Grain-Free
- Autism
- Inclusive Hiring



**THIRD-PARTY CERTIFICATION RESEARCH****Bee Free: A Health Food Brand Born to Help Win the Fight for Autism**Tobias P. Roberts <sup>1</sup>  | Karen E. E. Pendergrass <sup>2</sup> <sup>1</sup>Department of Standards, Spearhead Certifications, Encinitas, CA<sup>2</sup>Department of Standards, Spearhead Certifications, New York, NY**Correspondence**Tobias Roberts  
Department of Community Research,  
Spearhead Certifications, El Salvador**Contact**<sup>1</sup>Email: karen@paleofoundation.com<sup>1</sup>Twitter: @5WordsorlessKP<sup>2</sup>Email: tobias@paleofoundation.org**Abstract**

Many health food enterprises emerge from personal quests for dietary solutions. Bee Free exemplifies this trajectory. Founded by a mother of four, driven by the unique nutritional requirements of her children — notably one with autism — the brand established a niche rooted in the interplay between autism and gluten-free diets. This personalized foundation, combined with the credibility of third-party certifications, propelled Bee Free to prominence in the gluten-free and grain-free health food sector.

**KEYWORDS**

Third-Party Certifications, Gluten-free, Grain-free, Autism, Paleo Foundation, Local Supply Chains, Inclusive Hiring

**1 | INTRODUCTION**

For any mother with four children, cooking a meal everyone enjoys will undoubtedly take a bit of creativity in the kitchen. The task can be even more daunting if some of those children have specific dietary needs and restrictions. Bee Free is one health food company that operates in the gluten-free and grain-free health food niche. According to Jennifer Wiese, the founder, and CEO of Bee-Free, the company evolved from her desire to bake tasty gluten and dairy-free treats for her son, who was diagnosed with autism.

“I am the mom of four sons, and one of our sons is on the autism spectrum,” Wiese explains. “Back in 2006-2007, our son was diagnosed with autism, and it was a completely foreign concept to us. We didn’t really have a point of reference for autism. We didn’t know anybody who was living that life, but my husband and I are problem solvers. When we have a challenge or something in front of us that we don’t

know much about is we’re going to dig in and learn as much as possible and try to find a solution or maybe a better way than what’s already out there.”

And that is precisely what they did. Throughout their research, they found that there was not an abundance of empowering information in the autism community regarding how to help our autistic son. Healthy dietary alternatives that can help people cope with autism were also highly specialized or lacking.

Though there doesn’t seem to be a cure for autism, there are strategies and tools that people can access to provide a better life and a more engaging environment for children living with autism. Wiese and her husband ended up at an autism conference in Vancouver that taught them a lot about the autism community and about how vast and expansive the spectrum is. They also learned some of the powerful things people used to provide support.

“After all this research, we landed on a gluten-free diet as a potential tool to help our son cope with autism,” Wiese says. Recently, several independent studies have found that gluten- and casein-free (GFCF) diets can help people with autism. In a survey conducted by Knivsberg, it was reported that the GFCF diet effectively reduced urinary peptide levels, which is considered an indicator of opioid effect, and that there were improvements in autistic behaviors, non-verbal cognition, and motor problems.

Another academic review on gluten and its connections with Autism Spectrum Disorder states that:

An expanding body of literature is examining connections between Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and dietary interventions. While a number of specialist diets have been suggested as beneficial in ASD, gluten has received particularly close attention as a potentially exacerbating factor. Reports exist suggesting a beneficial effect of the gluten-free diet (GFD) in ameliorating behavioural and intellectual problems associated with ASD, while epidemiological research has also shown a comorbidity between ASD and coeliac disease.

However, both caregivers and clinicians have expressed an uncertainty of the value of people with ASD going gluten-free, and as the GFD otherwise receives considerable public attention, a discussion which focuses specifically on the interaction between ASD and gluten is warranted.

For Wiese and her husband, a gluten-free diet was a foreign concept. “Luckily, there was a little small section in the grocery in our town that had a few gluten-free products,” Wiese tells us.

“We bought and tasted them, and almost everything went in the trash because it just didn’t taste good. It all had a lot of chemicals and stabilizers, and even though it



IMAGE 1: Jennifer Wiese, founder of BeeFree

said it was a gluten-free cookie, it just tasted like cardboard.”

After this first introduction into the gluten-free world, the family felt intrigued and wanted to explore further. “We just got busy in the kitchen recreating favorite family recipes. I enlisted my mom to help. We visited some farmer’s markets for fresher ingredients, and once we had some gluten-free items that we thought tasted pretty good, we tried them out with some friends to see their reaction. What we found was that a lot of people were desiring more gluten-free options that were made with clean labels and simple ingredients and that also tasted delicious. These people were telling us that they just weren’t finding enough variety in the grocery stores and the other markets,” Wiese says.

Given the positive reception from her friends and family and the apparent need for healthy (and tasty) gluten-free food products, Wiese decided in 2010 to make this venture into a business.



EXHIBIT 1: Variety of BeeFree Warrior Snack Mixes in Mae's Apple Pie, Hagen's Berry Bomb, Auggy's Original, and Clay's Chocolate Buzz.

“Our business started from a personal need, and from my desire to create foods that were made with clean, simple gluten-free ingredients that also tasted delicious; food that everybody around my table could eat happily, not just to please the person who had to eat gluten-free. I wanted that inclusion around our dinner table,” she says.

After the initial years of brand creation, Wiese’s husband came on board with the company and brought his business experience. He saw that the brand had a scalable business proposition. Fast forward eight years, and today Bee Free sells hundreds of thousands of gluten-free products in over 3,000 retail stores nationwide.

As the company has grown, they have also remained intimately connected to its original motivation: helping people with autism. Not only does the company help to educate the autism community about the benefits of a gluten-free diet, but it also seeks to create positive lifestyle alternatives for people who live with autism.

“We are really passionate about creating jobs for a segment of the community that is often overlooked,” Wiese says. “People with autism often get passed by for a job because they have all these special things that they need to produce work.” A recent article in Forbes Magazine found that a staggering 50-75 percent of the 5.6 million autistic adults in the U.S. are unemployed or underemployed.

“As a company, we are really passionate about changing that reality. We really believe in giving people with autism a chance to do good and valuable work. It is just part of who we are and some of the messaging that we’re trying to connect to our brands,” she says.

## 2 | COMMITMENT TO LOCAL SUPPLY CHAINS

Wiese’s original experience with the world of gluten-free food alternatives found that most products were full of chemical fillers and stabilizers. Her research, however, told her that healthy and delicious gluten-free foods could be made from an organic, healthy, and clean ingredient list. “When I first got started trying to make gluten-free recipes, I was making everything in this tiny little rented kitchen in the middle of the night, which was the only free time I had,” she relates. “I was sourcing the eggs from a gal down the street that had a few chickens in her backyard. I was buying honey down the street from a neighbor who had beehives. I bought my apples locally from the farmer coming from the other direction. It’s always been really important to me to help my local farmer, grower, and producer to keep it all close to home. As we’ve grown, we have attempted to maintain that relationship as much as possible.”

As the company has scaled, its purchasing habits obviously have also had to change. However, the company has continued its commitment to supporting local supply chains as much as possible and creating solid relationships with the companies that provide them with the needed raw materials.

“I no longer can buy honey in a five gallon pail from the honey farmer down the road because now we buy truckloads of it,” Wiese states.

“With scale, we have changed a bit, but we do source our honey from Ohio, which is our neighboring state. We chose those honey producers because we went to visit their farm. We wanted to meet them and see how they run their family owned business. We saw there was a lot of synergies with



the ethics of our own company, and so that's how we chose our honey producer. We continue to use that same method with every ingredient that we source, because we want to have a relationship and we want to know that people that produce our raw materials. We really attempt to develop solid relationships with all our suppliers even though they're on the other side of the world."

### 3 | THIRD-PARTY CERTIFICATIONS: A WAY TO SHOW BRAND COMMITMENT TO SHARED CONSUMER VALUES

In 2016, Bee Free invested in several third-party certifications, including Paleo certification and Grain-Free certification. Before that, the company had also received a gluten-free certification. As the company grew, it found that its gluten-free product line was exactly what its consumers were looking for. They found that many of their consumers showed intense brand loyalty, and their customers validated their products, which fit many of their needs for their specific dietary requirements.

"We were also responding to what was hot and trendy in the consumer packaged goods market," Wiese explains. "We've tried our hardest to really stay a step ahead of what consumers are looking for and demanding. We feel like that's a good position for us to be in, and continuing to really listen to what our consumers are asking for helps us to continue to grow." One of the ongoing hottest trends in health food markets is gluten-free, grain-free products made with natural ingredients, low sugar content, and food products with those third-party certifications. "Our certification with the Paleo Foundation has really helped validate our product and our brand out there in the marketplace," Wiese believes. "When our consumers validate the quality of our products, not only with their purchases but also through their support on social media and other places, that really

gives us strength. We really believe that our third-party certifications really help us build confidence with our customer base. And that's a really big deal."

For Bee Free, their gluten-free, grain-free, and Paleo certifications were a natural fit precisely because these values were essential to their customer base. "If you're somebody who has a severe reaction when you eat gluten, it's understandable the need to be really specific about the foods that you choose to put into your body," Wiese says. "Given that was a part of our customer base, it was really important to build that confidence with our consumers from the very early beginnings of our company. Because we took the time to get to know our customers and what was really important to them, we understood the need to show a clear commitment to those standards. This allowed us to create a higher trust level, in the sense that our customer could be assured that a product truly is gluten-free."

With their certifications, Bee Free can showcase their shared values with their loyal customer base at the front and center of their packaging. "This allows us to get our values and commitments out there in front of the eyes of the consumers who truly value that," Wiese says. "We take health and safety very seriously, and we knew we needed to have somebody else involved in the process. Third-party certifications, then, provided another factor and another level of trust for our consumers. "

Because the company was started as a direct response to helping Wiese's son with autism, the gluten-free and grain-free certifications also provided an attractive, organic, and natural pathway for direct marketing strategies to consumers dealing with similar issues.

“The education piece was certainly a part of the reason we invested in these third-party certifications,” she says. A lot of people don’t have the necessary information, and just providing that information is helpful. If your family has anyone with special dietary needs, and you’re the primary buyer or cook for your home, understanding the benefits of certain types of diets is essential.”

Wiese wanted Bee Free’s products to offer educational value to families while giving them a better-tasting food option, a higher level of confidence in the clean ingredients, and a deeper level of trust and connection with the brand. When all of those things come together, the consumer typically makes it a priority to spread the word and share their new knowledge with other friends with the same struggles or issues. From a marketing perspective, consumers sharing that knowledge that the brand may have been able to communicate also leads to “word-of-mouth” advertising for the brand.

“Over the years, we have created this really amazing, tight knit tribe, as we like to say, of consumers and others who learn from us along the way. They believe in us and we do life right alongside each other. It is really, really unique and it’s really special. And I feel really blessed to be part of it,” Wiese says.

#### **4 | THE INCREASING NECESSITY OF THIRD-PARTY CERTIFICATIONS FOR RETAIL MARKETS**

Bee Free initially decided to put its third-party certifications on the back side of its packaging. Recently, they overhauled their packaging design and decided to put that certification on the front side.

Not every casual consumer takes the time to inspect the backside “fine print” on the back of the food items they purchase. “We just moved all those certifications to the front of the packaging so that it was crystal clear to our customer from our commitment to what those certifications entail. Having that certification is one way that consumers can connect, and they can know right away who you are and what you’re all about,” she says.

Furthermore, their third-party certifications have proved to be an invaluable part of advancing into different retail markets. “With our retail buyers, we know that trust and transparency are extremely important. They don’t only want to hear a claim that a company is gluten-free. Rather, many of them are actually requiring food brands to get certified,” she claims. “Today we’ve found that it’s not always just our choice whether we want to make certain claims, but a prerequisite wherein it is the retail buyer that saying: Okay, that’s really great what you’re claiming, but we need a third party certification so that we can feel really confident about putting this product on our retail shelves and in front of our consumers.”

Of course, the major retail companies have an absurd amount of data and information about what consumers demand regarding health, clean ingredients, and verifiable information regarding the nutrients and ingredients in a given food product. These retailers know that their consumers demand transparency and truth. In a market dominated by too many greenwashing practices, retailers are quickly learning that unverified claims can cause severe damage to consumer trust, confidence, and loyalty. Thus, the increasing importance of third-party certifications for health food brands wanting to break into the excessively competitive retail markets.

Wiese knows from first-hand experience that building a health food brand from the ground up is a challenging task. "I feel like brand building is really a group activity," she says. "The people behind the brand have a major responsibility in directing their marketing strategies to drive brand growth. But beyond that, whenever consumers share our story, or lessons they've learned from us, or a recipe they've made with one of our products: all of these also help to drive brand growth and increased visibility."

She also believes that when third-party certification organizations take the time to reach out, talk to brands, and learn their stories, that's also a part of helping to drive this whole process of building a successful brand. "There are so many brands out there, and having somebody take the time to shine a spotlight on our brand and want to help share our story is really important."

## 5 | CERTIFICATIONS

Bee Free's third-party certifications include the following:

- Certified Gluten-Free
- Certified Paleo
- Grain-Free Certified
- Good Manufacturing Practice

## 6 | DISCUSSION

Bee Free's journey underscores the pivotal role that third-party certifications play in assuring customers of the genuineness and integrity of a brand, especially in the health food industry.

regarding the quality and origin of their food products, third-party certifications have emerged as trustworthy stamps of approval. Bee Free's strategic decision to invest in certifications like gluten-free, grain-free, and Paleo exemplifies this notion.

A significant revelation from Bee Free's experience is the coalescence of brand loyalty and certifications. This combination has not only bolstered consumer trust but has also created a "tribe" of dedicated consumers who act as brand ambassadors. Wiese's statement that their customers "do life right alongside each other" highlights the profound relationship that can be built between a brand and its customer base. Furthermore, Bee Free's shift in packaging design, moving certifications to the front, acknowledges the changing consumer behavior and the importance of immediate transparency.

It's also worth noting the evolution of the retail industry, which is increasingly demanding third-party certifications. Retailers recognize the dual value of certifications: they bolster consumer trust and serve as a safeguard against potential backlash arising from unverified product claims. In an era where misinformation can rapidly spread, third-party validations are no longer just a marketing strategy but a business imperative.

## 7 | CONCLUSION

In the evolving landscape of health food markets, third-party certifications have transcended beyond mere labels to powerful brand narratives. For companies like Bee Free, these certifications symbolize a commitment to quality, transparency, and consumer trust. By responding proactively to market trends and anchoring their brand around verified



claims, Bee Free has harnessed the power of certifications to foster deep consumer relationships and pave the way for robust retail partnerships. Wiese's emphasis on collaborative brand building, where both consumers and certifying organizations play active roles, encapsulates the future of brand growth. As the market continues to become saturated, the brands that resonate most will be those that prioritize authenticity, transparency, and meaningful connections with their customers.

## 8 | CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors report no conflicts of interest.

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