

THE AMERICAN DREAM: STARTING AND GROWING A BUSINESS AS AN IMMIGRANT

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ABSTRACT

This case details Lorena Cantarovici's experiences with starting and growing her award-winning restaurants: Maria Empanada. While visiting a friend in Colorado, Lorena (an Argentinian immigrant) fell in love with the mountains and stayed. Homesick for her childhood empanadas, she made empanadas and sold them to her friends. To meet increasing demand, she opened several restaurants. Lorena addressed the pandemic by closing some restaurants and changing her business model. The case provides insights into issues immigrants might encounter when starting and growing businesses in dynamic environments while maintaining the values of their homeland cultures.

Keywords: immigrant business, restaurant, empanadas, buena onda, Small Business Administration

INTRODUCTION

Lorena Cantarovici and her single mother, Maria, had been selling electronic equipment on the streets of economically volatile Buenos Aires. They were constantly on the brink of homelessness. In search of a more stable life, Lorena obtained a degree in Accounting while working full-time to support herself and her mother. Due to the instability of the economy in Argentina, Lorena immigrated from Buenos Aires to the U.S with just very little cash, no English language skills, and a dream of "making it in America."

She learned English while working as a server in a Mexican restaurant. During this time, Lorena started seeing restaurants in a different way--as a business. She decided to learn all the jobs and areas of the restaurant including working as a dishwasher, busser and hostess (Huspeni, 2021). Over time, she developed a love for the restaurant industry and a passion for serving people. Lorena knew she wanted to start her own business by tapping into her Argentinian roots of making empanadas.

Empanadas represent joyous memories of her childhood home when she and her mother (Maria) would bond while preparing empanadas for their Argentinian family gatherings. Lorena wanted to share those feelings of joy and unity with people in the United States.

Early in her startup process, Cantarovici sought help by attending a local Small Business Development Center (SBDC) workshop to draft her first formal business plan. She worked

closely with SBDC counselors to address issues of marketing, accounting, legal and risk management. With the advice and support of the SBDC, Lorena created an operations manual and an employee manual before she ever had employees.

Part of growing a business is growing oneself as a person. Lorena has continued her education to improve as a restaurant owner while creating systems and structures to support her expanding chain of fast-casual restaurants. Cantarovici graduated from Goldman Sachs 10,000 Small Businesses program at Babson University and participated in the Latino Entrepreneur Leaders program at Stanford University.

Positive Management Style

Lorena has experienced great success not only selling empanadas but also growing and maintaining a strong team of employees. In an interview with Colorado Matters host (Ryan Warner), she describes her management style as “Buena Onda,” which means ‘good vibes’ or ‘positive interaction. It permeates the entire organization.

Maria Empanada’s Success

Maria Empanada has been in business for more than a decade currently employing 50 people and producing nearly 90,000 empanadas per month. Maria Empanada has earned national recognition as the leading brand of artisan empanadas and is credited with developing the highly scalable “Craft Casual” concept. This refer to delivering elevated food quickly.

In 2017, Lorena received the U.S. Small Business Administration’s Small Businessperson of the Year Award for the State of Colorado. She earned the title “Empress of Empanadas” from Guy Fieri when she was featured on “Diners, Drive-Ins and Dives.” The government of Argentina also has named Lorena as the Ambassador of the Argentinian empanada in the U.S. (VoyageDenver, 2020).

Furthermore, Zagat rated Maria Empanada as “One of the 12 Hottest New Bakeries in America.” Maria Empanada also got national attention when the U.S. Vice President Kamala Harris visited to promote the "Help is Here" tour. The purpose of this tour was to raise awareness for the Biden Administration’s grants and loans available to businesses.

Lorena is part of the small percentage who have raised over a million dollars. She is looking to expand nationwide and will need additional funds to do so.

References available upon request.