



Women OF INSPIRATION

MAKING IT HAPPEN

In recognition of International Women's Day, March 8, *Canadian Immigrant* presents our second annual "Immigrant Women of Inspiration" special — for 2015, we chose five exceptional women in business who embody this year's global theme — MAKING IT HAPPEN — with their innovative entrepreneurialism and inspiring determination: **Carolina Velez, Sihem Benali, Faten Alshazly, Margaret Adu and Lourdes Gant**



Photo by Alessandro Shimado

CAROLINA VELEZ *Exotic business*

BY LISA EVANS

Walking into the produce section of Loblaws, one can't help but notice the abundance of exotic fruits that line the produce bins, reaching out to the increasingly diverse Canadian consumer. This is sweet news to young immigrant Carolina Velez. The owner of ColombiaExotic, she launched her business in 2012 importing a fruit from her native country — the yellow pitahaya.

The yellow pitahaya is a cactus fruit that resembles the red dragon fruit, but is much sweeter. "The red dragon fruit is very bland. There's no taste to it," says Velez. The yellow pitahaya, on the other hand, is incredibly "refreshing" and tastes like a combination of melon and kiwi. It's also known to have many health benefits.

Ironically, Velez had never tried the yellow pitahaya when she lived in Colombia. Her first experience with the fruit was in Canada at a business matchmaking forum organized by the Government of Colombia where she met with the Yellow Pitahaya Growers Association of Colombia. "I just fell in love with it. Right away I had many ideas of how I could introduce it to the Canadian market," says Velez, who has a business background.

A graduate from one of the best business schools in Colombia, Velez immigrated to Canada in 2003 and immediately tried to find a job in

management, but felt trapped in entry-level positions. When her last contract at a multinational company ended, Velez decided to take the entrepreneurial path.

"I saw the yellow pitahayas and I just fell in love with the project. I did a business plan in one week. That's how in love I was with the idea," she says. "I never imagined that I was going to work with fruits. It was just something that appeared," she says.

So Velez launched ColombiaExotic in 2012 with one product and one major client, Loblaws. Getting Loblaws, the largest food distributor in Canada, as a client was a shocking success, even for Velez. She admits she had no idea what to expect when she walked through the corporate doors of Loblaws. "I thought I'm new, I'm young, I'm a new immigrant. How am I going to convince them?" she recalls.

Not one to let self-doubt get her down, Velez simply allowed herself to be driven by her passion. "I just had a mindset of I'm just going to be myself and tell them who I am and what my business is, what my product is and just go from there," she says.

It worked, and Velez landed the client of her dreams. But starting an importing business wasn't always easy for Velez, who had no prior experience working with fruits or with importing. "My mom sold her car and I sold my car to [my parents]. They took out a loan so they could give it to me because no banks were going to give me any money at all," recalls Velez.

Working with fruits comes with a host of challenges, she adds. "Every time you ship fruit, they go through QA [quality assurance]. They have to be perfect — the correct size, the correct weight, no scars, no marks," she says. "They're also very susceptible to temperature, to how they're handled, how they're packed," she says.

The first time Velez walked into a Loblaws store and saw the yellow pitahaya in the produce aisle, she stood for five minutes in shock. "I saw it and I said to myself I can't believe it. Now I'm seeing physically what I saw in my mind a year ago," says Velez.

Velez is now expanding ColombiaExotic to import purple passion fruit, yellow passion fruit and tamarindo. But it's not the number of products placed on store shelves, or the amount of money her business makes that Velez says makes her a successful entrepreneur. "Success is not an end in the road," she says. "I believe success is waking up every day and wanting to do what I do. If I were not feeling excited about what I do, I wouldn't be successful at all."