

Good practices

Chelo Gámez, an Iberian dream with signature



Senior Social Entrepreneurship European Project



Chelo Gámez

Retired lecturer at the University of Malaga and senior entrepreneur

Company Name: La Dehesa de los Monteros

Place: Malaga, Spain

Activity:

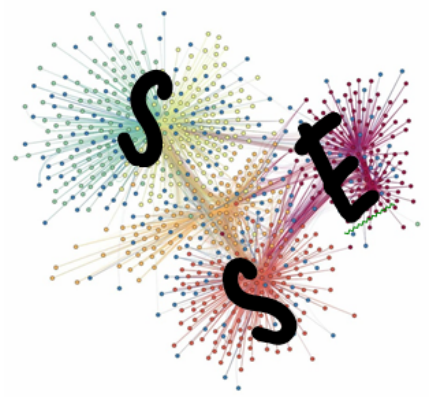
Breeder of purebred Iberian pigs. Producers of top-of-the-range Iberian ham and sausages.

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"La Dehesa de los Monteros is a company governed by the principles of social economy and care for nature"

Chelo Gámez, the first woman to become a full professor at the University of Malaga, traded in the classroom for the lush landscapes of the Genal river Valley. In 2008, the now livestock farmer created La Dehesa de los Monteros, a company dedicated to the breeding of 100% Iberian pigs. The products of La Dehesa de los Monteros are in demand by the most exclusive chefs in the world. However, Chelo's Iberian dream will come true when the designation of origin of the rubio dorado breed, native to the Serranía de Ronda, is recognised.



Chelo Gámez with a rubio dorado piglet

What is La Dehesa de los Monteros?

La Dehesa de los Monteros is a family business created in 2008 and today my two sons and my daughter are part of it. One as commercial director, other as marketing and advertising director and the other as director of administration and computerisation of the company.

La Dehesa de los Monteros is a company based on some fundamental principles of what is known as *social economy*. Profit should not only be for the owners or shareholders of the company, but also for the workers and other partners that make up the company.

How would you describe the process of creating your company?

The process of creating my company has been a slow process, gradual over time, very carefully studied and thought through each step, a process of trial and error in which I have been advised by experts from the University of Cordoba and where I have had to learn in depth, since I was entering into a field that was totally unknown to me.

The first thing I did was to select the Iberian breed I wanted to work with. To do this, I went round the Iberian breeding companies, studied the organoleptic characteristics of each breed and decided on the *entrepelada* or *retinta* breed.

La Dehesa de los Monteros will continue to grow as long as the company finds farms with the specific characteristics of the Serranía de Ronda area. To continue growing, another problem I face is that I need specialised, qualified personnel. I get field workers, but I need to incorporate other workers with a high professional and specific level into my company.



Chelo Gámez in the hand drying shed

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The process of creation has been very carefully studied as I was entering into an unknown field for me





What is the main competitive advantage that motivated your business idea?

The main competitive advantage is that from the beginning it was clear to us that the competitive framework was going to be differentiation, the only way to compete with little production in a market as mature as the Iberian cured meat market.



In this company we work with pure, selected Iberian strains. I always say that our pigs are real athletes, going up and down the steep hills, which means that the oleic acid produced by eating chestnuts and acorns produces a very strong intramuscular infiltration, which is a distinctive feature of our livestock.



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Differentiation is the only way to compete with little production in a market as mature as the Iberian cured meat market

What challenges or threats did you encounter in the development of your project? And how, if at all, did you manage to overcome them?

The main challenge I faced was to create a product based on differences, which forced us to feed and raise our pigs in a different way from what was usual in the area, generating mistrust of innovation in such an immobile market. This was the first challenge I faced.

On a personal level, the management of an agricultural company, in an eminently untrained and somewhat traditional and macho field, created barriers to entry for me in terms of training and the way of working for a woman who was neither from the mountains, nor from the countryside. I wanted to introduce innovations and these innovations were rejected by the farmers in the area.



I had to provide economic incentives to farmers who bred pigs for other, more powerful companies. Paying a little more and in less time than other already-established companies made farmers start working with me.





What support have you received from public administrations to create the company?

I have received continuing support from the Organización Comercial Agraria de la Serranía de Ronda. It provided us with technical and legal advice for the development of rural estates, in accordance with applicable legislation. Additionally, they gave technical advice to bring the estates into line with current regulations.

With the exception of a few subventions from Sabor a Málaga—the promotional brand of the Diputación de Málaga—to participate in national fairs and events with the aim of promoting the products, and an aid from the Junta de Andalucía in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, I have received little or no support from the public administration, especially for the recovery of the rubio dorado pig, where we have felt totally alone and isolated in what concerns the definitive boost that we now need for its recovery.



How has the COVID-19 pandemic affected the company's operations and what decisions have you taken to deal with this situation?

Our small size and the exclusivity of the product we make has allowed us to adapt to the new reality very quickly in order to compensate the sharp drops in the on-trade market, and thus balance our accounts.

In order to adapt to our new channels, we have been forced to refine the internal functioning of the company, to improve the packaging and to perfect the purchasing and shipping processes. The COVID-19 crisis has been an opportunity for us to become a better company.

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The COVID-19 crisis, has been an opportunity for us to become a better company

We have had to reinvent ourselves, by offering, for example, online sales to individuals. We have had a significant growth and have started to be present within the luxury gourmet distribution of El Corte Inglés in different cities in Spain for the first time, which has completely changed the weight of each channel in total sales.





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