

SSE spain

Senior Social Entrepreneurship European Project



Chelo Gámez

The professor who had
an Iberian dream



Chelo Gámez

Retired lecturer at the University of Malaga and senior entrepreneur

Company Name: La Dehesa de los Monteros

Place: Malaga, Spain

Activity:

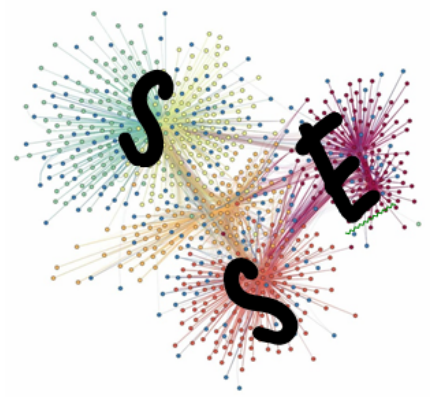
Breeder of purebred Iberian pigs. Producers of top-of-the-range Iberian ham and sausages.

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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 professor at the University of Malaga, traded in the classroom for the lush landscapes of the Genal 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 denomination of origin of the rubio dorado native to the Serranía de Ronda is recognised.



What is Dehesa de los Monteros?

Dehesa de los Monteros is a family business, created by me in 2008, of which my three sons are now fully involved. One is the commercial director, another is the marketing and advertising director and the other is the administration and IT director at the company.

The aim of the company is to make an Iberian dream come true, that is, that the hams from the Serranía de Ronda, 100 percent acorn-fed Iberian products, in accordance with the quality standard, are exported and known all over the world.

Nowadays, we have achieved high-quality products, 30% of which are exported to many countries around the world. Our niche market is international gourmet sector.

We have not achieved all the objectives I set out to accomplish. I have yet to reach the designation of origin. But this is a collective process that does not depend only on The Dehesa de los Monteros, but it also has to bring together the entire Iberian production industry within the Serranía de Ronda.

In the not-too-distant future, I would also like that all the Iberian pig farms in the Serranía de Ronda were run by companies from Malaga, because many of the pigs that are reared are finally sold to companies located in other provinces, which means that the added value does not stay in the area.

I would also like to point out that La Dehesa de los Monteros is a company based on some fundamental principles of what is known as social economy.



Our company governed by the principles of the social economy



Profit is key to any company, but making profit is not the only objective. I would rather say that profit has to have a social function. Profit should not only be for the owners or shareholders of the company, but also for the welfare of 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 every step to be taken, 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 a lot, as I was in a field that was totally unknown to me. I started alone, managing everything myself, as a worker and with 50.

The first thing I did was to select which 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 to choose the entrepelada or retinta breed.

At that time there was already a company, La Algaba de Ronda, which was starting to recover the autochthonous breed from the Serranía de Ronda and, when they learnt about my project, they contacted me. I got totally involved. It was a leap into the unknown. Those pigs in recovery were not recognized as pure Iberian.

The herd book was closed. Their size is short and their weight is very small, and the quality standard requires a minimum carcass weight to certify them as acorn-fed. But despite all these difficulties, it was clear to me.



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I was the professor who wanted to come here to breed pigs

I had everything tested: meat quality, tenderness, phosphorus, potassium, infiltration. The analyses made me decide to take the leap to recover the rubio dorado breed.

Today we have 200 animals, but the breed is not yet recognised. They are recognised as pure Iberian. But the stud book of the golden line is not open.

After the third year of dedicating myself to raising the pigs and the products being on the market, I decided to increase their quality and, as I said before, I had to attract farmers from the Serranía de Ronda area, from the Genal river valley, who were raising their pigs for very powerful companies.

I had to offer strong economic incentives. I was an unknown. I was the professor who wanted to come here to breed pigs. Giving economic incentive worked for me. I started to attract small farmers. I paid them a premium over the official purchase and selling prices and I paid them before the other brands.

But I had to keep growing. I wanted to keep growing and, therefore, the next step was a process of looking for farms where I could breed more Iberian pigs.



La Dehesa de los Monteros will continue to grow as long as it finds farms with the specific characteristics of the Serranía de Ronda area.

I will not buy or breed pigs on a flat pasture because the product is very different. My differential product has to be from areas with a very rugged terrain, so I started renting farms and I am still in the process.

But to continue growing, a problem I am facing 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. And I have managed to involve my two sons and my daughter in the company.

My son José, or Pepe, is currently the commercial director of the company, the one who focuses on marketing and export. My daughter, who has a degree in Marketing and Advertising, is the company's communications manager, and my son Ignacio, an engineer, is the one who manages all the company's computerization.

If you say the ID number of a given ham at my company, we know where it was raised, which farm it came from, what analysis it underwent, absolutely everything. We have complete traceability and I have achieved this thanks to the help of my children.

I currently manage the breeding of my pigs on my own leased farms in different ways and with farmers who work for me, with strict control of the feed and traceability to avoid heterogeneity in the production process, I am the one who controls the feed.



I am still running the farm, I did it from the beginning. I am now stepping back, and it will be my children who will take the reins of the company, but I will continue, I hope, to mark the strategic lines of the company so that the Iberian dream I had become a reality



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

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

That is why we rely on the differences in the product. That is why we call it *ibérico de autor, signature Iberian products*.

These differences are based on the unique characteristics of our breeding area: the Serranía de Ronda area. I will provide some data on them.

Here you can find grassland-covered mountains, with a very abrupt orography, full of quercus, in its different varieties.

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 has a very strong intramuscular infiltration, which is a distinctive characteristic of our pigs.



Secondly, in this company we work with pure, selected Iberian strains. We decided for the entrepelado or retinta lineage.

And a few years ago we joined forces with the La Algaba de Ronda farm to recover the rubio ibérico Iberian breed. Native to the Serranía de Ronda, this breed was abandoned in the 1960s and 1970s for economic reasons, since its profitability was low due to its small size.

Another distinguishing feature is the allnatural feed we give our pigs. Our pigs do not taste a grain of compound feed, wheat, peas and acorns during the montanera, the mast-feeding period. But we have introduced a differential element which is the incorporation of the native chestnut, the *pilonga* chestnut, being Ronda the second producer of chestnuts in Spain and the first in Andalusia.

We have called this incorporation the premontanera of chestnuts. The montanera is the time when pigs eat only acorns. The chestnuts produce the same amount of oleic acid as acorns and they fall just a month before the montanera was acorns.

Therefore, our products are 100% Iberian acorn products, but with an exclusive chestnut *premontanera*. The chestnut gives them a specific sweetness, a very special organoleptic characteristic.

Finally, we have an absolute control of the traceability of the products from the birth of the pig to the purchase of the piglet, to the pig being taken to the slaughterhouse and being sold in grocery stores or specialized shops.



What challenge or threat did you face while developing your project, and how, if at all, did you manage to overcome it?

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. It generated mistrust of innovation in such an immobile market. This was the first challenge I faced.

On a personal level, managing 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 not from the mountains, nor from the countryside. I wanted to introduce innovations and these innovations were rejected by the farmers in the area.

Once I had overcome the challenge of gaining their trust and had brought them to me, the next challenge was if I wanted to continue to grow I needed farms with the same characteristics, and this was a process of searching for pasture land in the Serranía de Ronda, where I could breed more pigs, since most of the local farmers were already selling them to me.

Overcoming all these processes has always been based on trust in my business project. The strategy of differentiation of my products and the constant search for excellence and financial sustainability has allowed the company to grow from 50 pigs in 2008 to the 1,000 we have slaughtered in 2020.



Overcoming all these processes has always been based on confidence in my business project



The main challenge I faced was to create a product based on differences

What support have you received from the public administrations for the creation of the company?

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

Apart from the Organización Comercial Agraria, which I have just mentioned, I have only receive a few subventions from Sabor a 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. Therefore, 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.

We are recovering the breed, we have 200 specimens, but the stud book has not yet been opened and, therefore, although they are there, they do not legally exist. We need the support from public administrations, from the Diputación de Málaga, from the other administrations, to achieve the recovery and the opening of the stud book of the rubio dorado breed, which can only be found in the Serranía de Ronda area.



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

Currently, 30% of our sales go to exports and 70% to the domestic market. In international markets, basically in Southeast Asia, our performance has been similar to last year, I would even say with slightly higher sales, if we analyze point by point the growth strategy in these markets.

Precisely so that the crisis in our country would not substantially affect our results this year. Of the 70% of sales in the domestic market, with a 40% exposure to the Horeca channel, which has been seriously affected by the pandemic, we have had to develop other sales channels.

We have had to reinvent ourselves, such as online sales to individuals. We have had a significant growth and have started to be 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.



The crisis, the pandemic, has been an opportunity for us to be a better company

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 for the sharp drops in the on-trade market, and thus balance our accounts. We believe that we are a better company today than we were in the past.

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



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