

# **The American Dream: Starting and Growing a Business as an Immigrant Case Study: Maria Empanada**

**Rebecca L. Prater**  
**Metropolitan State University**

**Cynthia L. Sutton**  
**Metropolitan State University**

*This case details Lorena Cantarovici's experiences with starting and growing her award-winning restaurant: 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. Much of the following is based on our interview with Lorena Cantarovici and Victor Arango.*

*Keywords: Lorena Cantarovici, Maria Empanada, Latina entrepreneur, Buena Onda (Positive Interaction), employee retention, management style, hiring practices, the American Dream, craft casual concept, U.S. SBA Small Businessperson of the Year Award, Diners, Drive-Ins and Dives*

## **HOW MARIA EMPANADA CAME ABOUT**

Lorena Cantarovici and her single mother, Maria, had been selling electronic equipment on the streets of economically volatile Buenos Aires, 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. She became the youngest branch manager for Argentina's largest private bank. At one point, she became a bank auditor in Mexico and earned her master's degree in marketing. Due to the economy's instability in Argentina, what she was making was not enough. In 2001, Lorena immigrated from Buenos Aires to the U.S with just \$300 in her pocket, no English language skills, and a dream of "making it in America." Lorena saw the USA as the land of opportunity, based on what she had seen on tv.

When she first arrived, Lorena got a job as a part-time server in a Mexican restaurant (Garcia's), thinking people would speak Spanish and she could get by without knowing English. She did OK because customers would point at the pictures on the menu versus speaking English. Nevertheless, she says working at the restaurant helped her learn English one conversation at a time. More importantly, she recognized that restaurants have systems and processes, something she knew a lot about, having worked in banking in Argentina and Mexico.

Lorena started seeing restaurants differently—as a business. She decided to learn every area and job of the restaurant, including working in the kitchen, as a dishwasher, as a busser and as a hostess. (Huspeni, 2022; Why not podcast; 2019) 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. However, starting a family and enduring the Great Recession delayed her from pursuing her venture.

Lorena had fond memories of the five-hour process of making empanadas with her mother while they discussed the religious and political issues of the day, sort of like the American quilting circle. (The technique of making empanadas is passed down from generation to generation, focusing on the artful folding of each empanada according to its ingredients.) The empanadas represent joyous memories of her childhood home when she and her mother (Maria) would have fun and 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. (Townsend, 2019)

To bring a bit of Buenos Aires to America, Lorena began making empanadas in her kitchen using the time-tested recipes of her mother and grandmother and selling small quantities to friends. So, it makes sense that she'd name her business after her mother and grandmother, both Maria.

Her first break came when a caterer ordered empanadas after eating them at a friend's party. A friend helped her convert her garage into a commercial kitchen but demand soon outpaced Cantarovici's capacity. That same friend encouraged her to rent a small shop. With a \$4000 loan from her mother-in-law and a friend, she opened her first hole-in-the-wall location in a Hispanic area of Denver where she figured people would be familiar with empanadas. The problem was, "the Mexican empanada is sweet, and our clients would come in expecting to find their version of empanadas and would leave disappointed because ours are savory." Lorena explains (Meet Lorena Cantarovici of Maria Empanada in South Broadway and Aurora, 2020). Upon realizing this location was not a good fit in 2011, Maria Empanada moved to 1298 S. Broadway in Platt Park which is still up and running. This has a high traffic, sunny location with outside seating that better represents Buenos Aires (a main goal for Lorena). Given the success of this location, they have since added more restaurants.

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 in 2010. She worked closely with SBDC counselors addressing marketing, accounting, legal and risk management issues. With the advice and support of the SBDC, Lorena created both an operations manual and an employee manual before she ever had employees. Because of her success in banking in Argentina, which was based heavily on having a manual for everything, creating and establishing processes for her restaurant was familiar and easy.

Small business owners must wear many hats. Even though she had experience and education in accounting, managing, and marketing from her life in Mexico and Argentina, Lorena needed support in the skills that she lacked, and she sought help. Through this support, Lorena was able to secure the funding she needed to move to her Broadway location. She obtained a \$63,000 microloan from the Small Business Administration's (SBA) microloan lender Colorado Enterprise Fund.

Part of growing a business is growing oneself as a person. Lorena has continued her education to improve as the 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 selling empanadas and 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' and it permeates the entire organization.

*“To have Buena Onda is to positively relate. A person can have Buena Onda and a place can have it as well. It determines how we interact with our customers, our physical place of work and especially ourselves within the company. The phrase is brought up at every company meeting and it is constantly defined, discussed and it has become the benchmark of how we interact with one another and with others. It is such a powerful element in our company that we have a 90% employee retention rate – unheard of in the restaurant industry, particularly in this market!” (Warner, 2019) [Note: This impressive retention rate occurred before and after the pandemic.]*

She recognizes the opportunity she has to develop strong professional roles for her employees. With her as the company’s visionary, she must groom employees to maintain the unique flavor of the food and environment of the business.

One way Cantarovici addressed the employee challenges of the restaurant environment is by hiring people that are like her, with a strong work ethic and passion for serving people. “One of the main ingredients is hiring somebody like you. And further, hire somebody that is better than you.” States Cantarovici. She recognizes Victor Arango, as her right-hand man. Arango is the brand ambassador, in charge of marketing and PR. “He is better than me in communication. He talks about Maria Empanada in a way that makes me melt.” She has hired someone to manage the kitchen who understands the food side, knows how to track food, and identify efficiencies. She can do these things but someone else can do better and is not afraid to admit it.

Humility is a characteristic they look for in hiring as well. Even though Lorena is the owner, founder, and CEO, she is humble and treats all her employees and customers with love and respect. This helps create the Buena Onda vibe that is so important to Maria Empanada. Lorena is not threatened by employees who are there to learn from her and start their own business. In fact, she believes Maria Empanada is an “incubator of the American Dream.” If she can help someone learn the business and then start something of their own, it is a win for everyone. Cantarovici states, “You can live your own American dream by being here. We’re going to support you. We want you. We’re not intimidated. We expect you to dream. We expect you to pursue your dreams.” Lorena is the perfect example of someone living the American dream and helping foster that in others.

Another secret to successful hiring is Maria Empanada’s practice of hiring grandmothers. In an interview with Dennis Huspeni for the Denver Gazette, Lorena states, “I’m very proud of what we do to hire grandmothers,” she said. “Women, when they get to a certain age, don’t get hired anymore. It’s called ageism. We welcome people of older age.” (Huspeni, 2022) They are less likely to change jobs, call in sick, and perfectly reinforce the loving environment they have created at Maria Empanada. In fact, Cantarovici’s first employee was a grandmother who needed work. She is still with the company, owns shares of the company, and helped Lorena set up systems for management along the way.

Hiring was a struggle at first. To know how to properly staff the restaurants came only through experience and “listening to the company.” Once the business started growing, Lorena hired many people to fill positions and give herself a day off. Over time, the roles were defined and reworked. People were moved around and filtered out. It was a trial and errors process. Now, when they open a new location, they have a good idea of how many people they need to staff the location based on the restaurant's unique footprint. The important thing was to listen to what the company needed. Cantarovici continues to listen to the company as a separate and complete entity who has needs, wants and direction.

Determining pay has been an interesting challenge for Cantarovici. It is a balance of how you treat them and how you pay them. Initially, when there was little money, she had to compensate by treating her employees extremely well. She states, “I needed to treat them very well, because I couldn’t pay them well.” She did this by providing support in other ways like movie tickets or a bonus based on a catering job. Eventually, she could offer medical, transportation, and educational benefits. It is a balance that must work itself out over time. “I didn’t receive a paycheck probably for the first five years,” Lorena remembers.

The artisan empanadas are based on Lorena’s mother’s and grandmother’s recipes and intricate processing. It took two months to train employees to hand roll, twist and fold the empanadas. Initially, each

of the 12 different kinds of empanadas had a special fold called “repulgues.” While now there are machines to fold them, Cantarovici insists Maria empanadas are hand-touched. Her team stamps each empanada with the main ingredient. This has helped the customer identify which empanada they want. Identifying empanadas based on the unique fold proved to be very complicated.

Currently, Maria Empanada structure includes Victor Arango, the brand ambassador and PR specialist, a chief operations officer, plant production manager, a finance department, general managers (GM) for each store, and shift managers under each GM. Cantarovici’s goal is to empower her employees. She does this by stepping away from the store meetings and allowing her GMs to conduct these. While she doesn’t mind participating in these important meetings, she feels it is best to give control to the general manager, who is running the show. Often training is done by site managers or outside consultants.

Cantarovici receives a great deal of outside support through a board of advisors, industry-specific mentors, Colorado Restaurant Association advisors, digital consultants, and other women’s professional organizations. Lorena remarked, “Surround yourself with people that know their stuff and actually listen to what they have to say.”

Besides listening to outside advisors, it is imperative to listen to the business. In talking about running a successful company, Cantarovici states, “The business speaks. The business tells you what it needs, when it needs it, what it doesn’t.” She listens. Her team listens. Lorena remains humble and leads from a position of observing and listening.

## **MARIA EMPANADA’S SUCCESS**

Victor Arango believes Maria Empanada’s success is based on Lorena’s perspective of starting and growing a corporation, not just a restaurant. She has an overarching idea that includes multiple locations, and different types of food delivery besides sit-down restaurants such as counter service, frozen product sold through grocery stores, and fresh product sold to local coffee shops. They are also planning to offer franchises in the future. Arango states, “Everything has a process. And that process requires sitting down and thinking about it.” It is this expanded view of the company that helps guide growth.

Over a decade in business, Maria Empanada currently employs 50 people and produces nearly 90,000 empanadas monthly. Maria Empanada has earned national recognition as the leading brand of artisan empanadas. It is credited with developing the on-trend and highly scalable “Craft Casual” concept, delivering elevated food quickly.

In 2017, Lorena received the U.S. SBA Small Businessperson of the Year Award for the State of Colorado. She earned the title “Empress of Empanadas” from Guy Fieri when 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)

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

How Did She Do It? It was not easy. Her biggest challenge has been to raise money for growth. According to a recent Forbes article: “A small slice - 2.6% of venture dollars went to minorities and 2.2% went to women- that’s \$4.2 billion out of a \$87.3 billion pie. According to Project Diane, as of January 2021, only 93 Black and 58 Latinx women have ever raised over \$1M.”

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.

To raise awareness for Biden’s “Help is Here” tour, touting the benefits of the \$1.9 trillion coronavirus relief bill, Vice President Kamala Harris visited Maria Empanada’s Broadway location on March 16, 2021. When asked how they were picked to be the visitation location for Harris, Lorena explained, “She picked Maria Empanada because we were a good example of something that they were looking for.” When they requested a restaurant with a woman- and immigrant-owned small business with a good reputation, Maria Empanada was at the top of the list.

## **SURVIVING THE PANDEMIC**

They were just getting their feet under them when Covid 19 hit in 2020. Like most businesses, they had to downsize for a short time. Cantarovici laid off 60% of her staff, deeply cut expenses, closed three or her five locations, and scrambled to set up an online ordering system for deliveries and take-out.

True to the Buena Onda philosophy, Lorena allowed her laid-off employees to keep their bus passes for 90 days, paid them a week's severance pay, and gave generous gift cards to use at her shops. For the first several weeks of the pandemic, Cantarovici prepared "canastas familiares," or family baskets each with a week of food which she made available to her laid off workers. (Antonation, 2020, Westword)

Two Paycheck Protection Program (PPP) loan rounds also helped them survive. The nature of her product and the fact that people were forced to take the empanadas home helped her endure the restaurant slow down. Empanadas are great to eat fresh and warm at a cozy table in the restaurant. They are also perfect to take home and put in the freezer to eat later.

In an interview with 5280 Magazine writer (Patricia Kaowthumrong), Cantarovici explained, "When I had the shock and privilege of hosting Vice President Kamala Harris, I conveyed to her how fundamental restaurants are to the economy at large as well as a societal anchor. Restaurants need saving was my entire theme. I also told her how much of a help the PPP was for us and that we, like so many other restaurants, would simply not be here were it not for this lifeline." (Kaowthumrong, 2021)

In the same 5280 interview with Kaowthumrong, Cantarovici talked about how a small restaurant's success impacts the local, national, global economies. "Independent restaurants, more than any other industry that I can think of, are tangled networks of small businesses and a terminal point of vast ecosystems that have repercussions globally," she says. "The butterfly effect is the idea that small things have unexpected impacts on complex systems."

A new online ordering system, high-speed internet, and health benefits for full-time employees were some of the changes Maria Empanada implemented because of the Covid disruption. They also started shipping frozen empanadas nationwide. (O'Neill, 2021)

## **BIGGEST CHALLENGES FOR LORENA CANTAROVICI**

Because Cantarovici did not speak much English when she arrived in the US, language has been her biggest challenge. Over the years, she has learned the language with great intention and lots of practice. However, it is hard to learn the intricacies of a language. Just because you can speak English does not mean you have a command of the professional use of it. When a sophisticated investor is asking questions, it takes a while to respond properly when you have to think deeply about how you will answer in proper business language. Lorena explains, "I feel stupid sometimes that I cannot talk in the articulated way the investors seek. It makes you feel super intimidated. That is a huge barrier for Latinos to start because it is an intimidation."

Besides communication, money is another important and ongoing issue. To grow, a business needs access to capital. This is a challenge for anyone in the restaurant business but is exacerbated by Cantarovici being a woman and an immigrant.

"I lacked credibility," Cantarovici explained. "Because I'm Latina. Nobody tells you that, but you can sense that."

"For every dollar invested by venture capitalists in 2022, 1.9% went to women. Of that 1.9%, 25% went to minority women." Victor Arango explained, "There was a recent study that came out that showed that if a woman entrepreneur has a male co-founder, that 1.9% investment goes up to 17.6%."

In the beginning, when there is little money, you have to make do. Most of the fixtures and furnishings in their Broadway location came from Craig's List. They are proud to say most of the store is decked out in secondhand items. It is smart to keep tight control of the purse strings. But at some point, even that is not enough.

Lorena acknowledges that the restaurant business is one of the most challenging types of businesses to run. From choosing the right location, creating an inspiring menu, finding reliable suppliers, keeping track

of inventory, serving liquor, and managing food safety, all restaurants must deal with these issues (10 Challenges to Owning A Restaurant, 2019). According to Grubhub in an article titled “How to overcome the four biggest challenges restaurant owners will face in 2023” (2022). The 4 biggest challenges restaurant owners will face in 2023, in addition to the previously mentioned issues, restaurants also must be concerned with tackling inflation and rising food costs, finding and retaining quality staff in a post covid world, controlling growing operational costs and continuously reaching new customers.

## **STRATEGIC GROWTH PLAN**

To sell empanadas nationwide, they plan to add three new locations within the next year. While the challenge of finding workers seems to plague food-service, Lorena hires mostly Latina grandmothers who are hardworking and love the hands-on, family-oriented environment she has created. When starting her business and needed funding, she decided not to sell any part of her business to investors.

Maria Empanada continues to expand. Cantarovici’s team looks for locations where they can bring a bit of Buenos Aires. They strategically locate in neighborhoods where old and new are appreciated. Lorena extolls the benefits of opening stores in neighborhoods because people will always be there whether they work from home or elsewhere. (O’Neill, 2021).

## **HOW BEING AN IMMIGRANT HAS AIDED HER SUCCESS**

When addressing how being an immigrant aided her success, Lorena replied saying, “I think the story; the story is an incredible asset.” She pointed out that being a woman and an immigrant was an asset and a liability in getting funded. Companies often must dedicate a certain amount of funding to underserved communities. Funding Maria Empanada helped the funders check those boxes. “Being an immigrant and a woman is a challenge and an asset.” Lorena explained. She said it was important to know how to leverage these dimensions to support her company’s growth. The PPP loans from the government as a reaction to covid were extremely helpful.

When asked about what makes the USA an ideal place to start a business, Lorena identified three aspects, structure, simplicity, and opportunity. In Argentina, there was little structure, which made everything complicated and limited opportunities for people. In the US, there is a well-defined way of doing things. It is easy to follow the systems the government has set up to register a business, pay sales and income taxes, apply for loans, and get needed support.

Lorena Cantarovici now helps other immigrants navigate the business system. She speaks to communities in need of assistance and supports her employees looking to start their own businesses. She is committed to giving back to a system that has provided her the structure to succeed.

## **WORK-LIFE BALANCE**

Even with all that is happening with Lorena’s business, she stays true to her family’s values and the importance of family. Thus, she believes in work-life balance and spending time with family. Lorena is a wife to an involved and supportive husband (who works in the financial industry) and a mother to three boys. She takes vacations with her husband and sons even if they are just trips to the mountains. They recharge by shutting off e-mails, messages, etc., and spending time with their children. (Drake-McDonough, 2019) Lorena believes one of her biggest challenges is the management of time. It is difficult to find time for herself. With a supportive and effective team, strict guidelines about phone use, a husband who knows how important this business is, and a commitment to self-care, she is able to strike a healthy balance.

The key to Maria Empanada’s success is the owner’s and her team’s humility. “We listen to the business. The business will speak to you very clearly.” States Lorena.

## REFERENCES

- Antonation, M. (2020, March 25). Maria Empanada Gets Creative to Keep Business Running. *Westword*.
- Drake-McDonough, C. (2019, May). 12 Influential Colorado Moms. *Colorado Parent*. Retrieved from <https://www.coloradoparent.com/influential-colorado-moms-2019/>
- Durgempudi, P. (2019, March 8). She came to America with \$300 in her pocket and now she has an empanada empire. *303 magazine.com*. Retrieved from <https://303magazine.com/2019/03/maria-empanada-lorena-cantarovici/>
- Grubhub for Restaurants. (2022). *How to overcome the 4 biggest challenges restaurant owners will face in 2023*. Retrieved from <https://get.grubhub.com/blog/biggest-challenges-restaurants-face/>
- Hotel Propeller. (2019, July 8). *10 Challenges to Owning A Restaurant*. Retrieved from <https://hotelpropeller.com/10-challenges-to-owning-a-restaurant>
- Huspeni, D. (2022, February 23). The story, and the woman, behind Denver's Maria Empanada. *The Denver Gazette*.
- Kaowthumrong, P. (2021, July 27). What Denver's Most Famous Empanada Maker Learned From the Pandemic. *5280: Denver's Mile High Magazine*. Retrieved from <https://www.5280.com/what-denvers-most-famous-empanada-maker-learned-from-the-pandemic/>
- O'Neill, L. (2021, March 17). Q&A: Maria Empanada founder on Tuesday visit by Vice President Harris. *Business Den*.
- Prater, R., & Sutton, C. (2023, January 27). *Interview with Lorena Cantarovici and Victor Arango at the Broadway store*. Denver, CO.
- Townsend, T. (2019, June). It all started in a garage. *Hispanic Network: A Latino Business & Employment Magazine*. Retrieved from <https://hnmagazine.com/2019/06/it-all-started-in-a-garage/>
- Voyage Denver. (2020, September 22). *Meet Lorena Cantarovici of Maria Empanada in South Broadway and Aurora*. Retrieved from <http://voyagedenver.com/interview/meet-lorena-cantarovici-maria-empanada-south-broadway-aurora/>
- Warner, R. (2019, April 3). CEO spotlight: Q&A with Lorena Cantarovici of Maria Empanada by Ryan Warner Colorado Matters, host. *Blackstone Entrepreneurs Network*. Retrieved from [bencolorado.org](http://bencolorado.org)
- Why not podcast. (2019). EPISODE TWENTY-SIX. *Why Not* podcast. Retrieved from <https://whynotmedia.co/buena-onda/>

## TEACHING NOTES

### **The American Dream: Starting and Growing a Business as an Immigrant Case Study: Maria Empanada**

#### **OVERVIEW OF THE CASE**

The case provides the history, environment, and steps that **Maria Empanada** took on its way from the founders' vision to being a successful restaurant.

#### **SUGGESTIONS FOR USING THE CASE**

Several courses could use the story of a successful start up to a well-run company built on solid values and principles that survived the pandemic. The case could be used in introductory management, organizational behavior, entrepreneurship, strategic management, and human resources courses.

#### **LEARNING OBJECTIVES**

1. Analyze company's SWOT and suggest directions for the future.
2. Analyze how the company got started and progressed through various challenges.
3. Discuss the CEO's management style and how that affects the success of her company.
4. Evaluate the advantages and disadvantages of being an immigrant entrepreneur.
5. Discuss the importance of being involved with the community and helping other immigrants succeed in business.

#### **SUGGESTED ASSIGNMENT QUESTIONS**

1. What are main aspects of a SWOT for Maria Empanada and suggestions for the future based on SWOT?
2. How did Lorena get started and how can others benefit from her experience in starting a small business?
3. What were/are her biggest challenges and how did she address them?
4. How did "Buena Onda" impact Lorena's management style and success?
5. How is she involved in the community, why is this important to her, and what are the benefits?
6. What are advantages and disadvantages of being an immigrant (& how did/does she address these)?

**ANSWERS TO QUESTION 1.** What are main aspects of a SWOT for Maria Empanada and suggestions for future based on SWOT?

#### **Strengths**

The company's biggest strengths are its unique empanadas, established reputation, community involvement, brand acceptance and empowering management style. Loyal employees who she helps start businesses if desired. The empanadas are portable, can be eaten anywhere, and can be frozen. Lorena has a professional board of advisors, industry specific mentors, Colorado Restaurant Association advisors, digital consultants, and other women's professional organizations. She also has a knowledgeable marketing and PR person (Victor) who is her right-hand person with excellent communication skills. The company has won numerous awards and recognition. The company is well run, ethical, profitable, and financially successful. The Website is informative which enables online ordering. Lorena has tapped into an older population of women as employees who have a good work ethic and love to take care of people through food.



## **Weaknesses**

Small, local restaurant that is not widely known. Being an immigrant, female entrepreneur, and needing funding. Struggling with English especially with sophisticated business terminology.

## **Threats**

The biggest threats are getting adequate funding and intense competitive rivalry in the fast-food industry. Small restaurants historically have high failure rate. Mexican empanadas are sweet versus savory like Maria Empanada's.

## **Opportunities**

These include high customer demand for fast casual food which is a growing market segment. Endless supply of older workers (e.g., grandmothers). Expanding to other locations with high foot traffic and selling in national and international markets. Finally, an opportunity exists to expand their product offerings to other Argentinian foods and desserts and teaching others to make their foods.

### *Sample Suggestions for the Future*

1. Sell at sporting events.
2. Sell at airports.
3. Offer classes and/or information on internet on how to make their empanadas.
4. Have discount or rewards for frequent purchases.
5. Franchise the brand.
6. Open additional stores in areas with high foot traffic.

**ANSWERS TO QUESTION 2.** How did she get started and how can others benefit from her experience in starting a small business?

Lorena sold small quantities of empanadas that she made in her kitchen to her friends. Then build a commercial kitchen in her garage and was guided by others. She learned all aspects of the restaurant business while working at Garcia's, a national Mexican restaurant chain and learned that the Mexican clients would expect a sweeter version of empanada.

Others can benefit from her experience in many ways including create a professional business plan to present to investors, get help from knowledgeable entities (such as Small Business Institute), do market analysis of new locations and products, expand knowledge on how to do business in the U.S., genuine care for welfare of employees and customers, be tenacious, and persist with your values (e.g., Buena Onda).

**ANSWERS TO QUESTION 3.** What were/are her biggest challenges and how did she address them?

- Funding: family and friends helped at first; lots of banks turned her down; received funding from Small Business Administration's (SBA) microloan lender Colorado Enterprise Fund and received Paycheck Protection Program (PPP) loans during the pandemic.
- Fluency in English language: continuous practice; Victor helps, surround yourself with people who are better than you.
- Mexican empanadas sweeter: locate near appropriate clientele; manage expectations by describing empanadas on website/menu
- Locations: carefully select locations that are similar to Buenos Aires and that have visibility/foot travel
- Covid 19 pandemic: close stores; revise business procedures (e.g., sell online)

**ANSWERS TO QUESTION 4.** How did Buena Onda impact her management style and success?

Lorena states: “It determines how we interact with our customers, our physical place of work and especially ourselves within the company. The phrase is brought up at every company meeting and it is constantly defined, discussed and it has become the benchmark of how we interact with one another and with others. It is such a powerful element in our company that we have a 90% employee retention rate – unheard of in the restaurant industry, particularly in this market!” Buena Onda also creates loyal customers and good community relations.

**ANSWERS TO QUESTION 5.** How is she involved in the community, why is this important to her, and what are the benefits?

Lorena Cantarovici now helps other immigrants navigate the business system. She speaks to communities in need of assistance and supports her employees looking to start their own business. She is committed to giving back to a system that has provided her the structure within which to succeed.

**ANSWERS TO QUESTION 6.** What are advantages and disadvantages of being an immigrant entrepreneur?

When addressing how being an immigrant aided her success, Lorena replied saying, “I think the story; the story is an incredible asset.” She pointed out that being a woman and an immigrant was an asset and a liability in getting funded. Companies often must dedicate a certain amount of funding to underserved communities. Funding Maria Empanada helped the funders check those boxes. “Being an immigrant and a woman is a challenge and also an asset.” Lorena explained. She said it was important to know how to leverage these dimensions to support the growth of her company. The PPP loans from the government as a reaction to covid were extremely helpful.

When asked about what makes the USA an ideal place to start a business, Lorena identified three aspects, structure, simplicity and opportunity. In Argentina, there was little structure, which made everything complicated and limited opportunities for people. In the US, there is a well-defined way of doing things. It is easy to follow the systems the government has set up to register a business, pay sales and income taxes, apply for loans, and get needed support.

Disadvantages include how immigrants are treated, the lack of understanding the finer aspect of the English language and how to maneuver starting a business. Of course, business connections must be developed from scratch.