

THE FAIRY LADY

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Telos: From a teacher to an entrepreneur. Can you tell us your story?

Anna Di Costa: I chose to leave my job as a tenured teacher in the state school system and set off on a new career path, full of unknowns, mainly because in my heart I felt like that was the right thing to do. When my father passed away, I decided that I also needed to do my part in helping to further my family's small artisan business. I never looked back, not even for an instant, to reflect on the professional and economic stability I was leaving behind. I looked straight ahead, towards the future, at conquering a new work experience that may have seemed uncertain. I've never considered it uncertain. Actually, I discovered and found the courage and will to start a new career that wasn't easy, aware I'd have to face completely different situations and work in new, tough contexts, requiring new, specific skills. But I was determined to face that change, which was to affect not only my professional life but my personal and social life as well, with the deep certainty that I'd make it. I studied, I worked hard and tackled marketing, graphic design and commercial activities. I wanted to assimilate as much as possible and learn to manage and manage myself in this new world. We had just finished building a new **manufacturing plant** that was large enough for high-volume production. Even though we had other opportunities, in more interesting geographical areas that would have facilitated our work, my brother Enzo – the founder of the firm and a brilliant, creative man – and I chose not to abandon the place where we were born and to build the new manufacturing plant in Francavilla di Sicilia, in Valle dell'Alcantara, just a few kilometres from the enchanting town of Taormina. Our goal was to transform our small artisan business producing *torroni*, chocolate and baked goods into an industry: an ambitious project in a poor area where there was no tradition or vocation of industrial food production. The first step was to conquer new markets. Together with my brother, our aim was to expand into foreign markets.

I knew both French and English very well and he's an excellent businessman and flawless in public relations. We combined our skills and with great cooperative spirit pushed forward, starting with France and succeeding in supplying our products to some of the major transalpine retailers.

Over the years we've also positioned ourselves on the German and European market in general, on the transatlantic market in the USA and Canada, and we're now also in Latin America, Asia and Australia. Our small artisan firm has transformed into a business that manages to give jobs to around 120 direct employees and provides employment in a broad-range of satellite industries.

What does it mean to do business in Sicily today? What are the main problems you have to face?

Doing business in Sicily hasn't been easy and still isn't easy, but it's very engaging and at times fascinating, daring. If you've decided to go into business, you aren't afraid of challenges, you face them with the awareness of someone who knows that what counts aren't the problems but the goals you have to reach; and when you succeed, you celebrate because you know you've achieved something extraordinary, even when it might seem ordinary in other contexts.

Every day we face the difficulties of working in an area where organisation and infrastructure are either derelict or non-existent, far more than in other regions in Italy.

This is also why we put our **company policy** down in writing.

There's the satisfaction of doing something, not just for yourself, but for others as well, of making it possible for many families to live where they were born with peace of mind, without leaving their homeland, and to face the future without having to worry too much. We've given young high school and university graduates the opportunity to get professional training and we've given them the tools they need to do high quality work enabling them to measure themselves against the rest of Italy and the world. They've got a wealth of experience that opens their minds and teaches them to set their sights on increasingly bigger, more ambitious goals. We've given many women, mainly in the packaging sector, the opportunity to work outside the home; and sometimes it's been difficult – and we've even encountered reluctance – to get them to agree to be away from their families for several hours a day.

What are the main challenges you've had to face in the markets and what business strategies turned out to be winning ones?

I don't think I'd actually call them challenges. You show up on the market with your product, with your strategies, with all your experience and knowledge.

Nowadays, what counts is selling something with value, but that many people can afford.

And our **Marie Ange** product line is based precisely on this concept. We sell beauty! Our tin boxes, featuring graceful, winged

fairies, are like lovely little treasure chests elegantly enshrining our sweets and baked goods. Chocolate pralines, baked goods, *mini-torroni*: a world of beauty and preciousness where anybody can afford to enter. This magic is the result of a winning business and marketing strategy because we've got our feet firmly planted in the real world, and this has allowed us to become key players in international markets where people want to purchase high quality products at very competitive prices. With these features, over the years we've also conquered a large share of the domestic market, where we are present in the main large-scale distribution chains, and our major advertising campaigns on the TV networks RAI and Mediaset have contributed significantly to sales.

You've proven that commitment, hard work and dedication are the building blocks of success. Yet if you could make a wish list for the Institutions, both local and national, to support businesses in southern Italy, what would you ask for?

Behind each success, big or small, there's passion for your work, definitely dedication and commitment but also a spirit of sacrifice. Where there's passion and love for what you do, there's no obstacle that can't be overcome, everything becomes feasible and your efforts don't make you weary. My wish list for the Institutions? Just expressing your wishes isn't enough, nor is it even necessary. You need to teach minds to leave behind mechanisms that lead to apathy, to resignation and at times to a victim complex. We live in a land, Sicily, that's full of untapped resources, where you really can dedicate yourself to experiences that help you to grow, build and start new career paths and create, through work, the prosperity that's lacking. If you don't have this mentality, the desire to take risks, to put yourself on the line, if you don't have the strength to believe you can start small and from something small build your future, then there isn't much the Institutions, the organisations, the infrastructure can do. Obviously, in a modern country the Institutions should have less red tape. They should encourage people to be bold, to develop concrete ideas. They should provide incentives and facilitate people who put themselves on the line with rapid, practical, basic, modern assistance. They should quickly embrace people's energies and their *can-do spirit* and actually allow them *to get things done* fast and with the awareness that they're helping to seize and foster each opportunity for growth in the local area.

Marco Sonsini

Editorial

Why are we calling her the Fairy Lady? Because it was actually Anna Di Costa, interviewed for the December issue of PRIMOPIANOSCALA^c, who came up with the idea, thanks to her exquisite taste, for the *Marie Ange* collection, decorated with *graceful fairies*, as Anna calls them, with light, transparent wings. We couldn't have chosen a better story for the last issue of the year: a beautiful story without even the slightest trace of naïve optimism. Our story is set in Sicily, the island of many faces, of the starkest and at times even the most jarring contrasts: contradictions in the landscape, contradictions in the character of the Sicilian people as well as historical, economic and social contradictions.

Leonardo Sciascia, an important Sicilian writer, once said: 'I have never been able to love Sicily wholeheartedly, without also relinquishing my feelings of intolerance, aversion and resentment. Resentment for what is old, stupid, absurd in Sicily, for its ability to immediately turn the new into the old. Yet I know I have always had to and wanted to come to terms with Sicily, by remaining there; and the fact that is also an important declaration of love, in the end.' And Anna Di Costa also stubbornly decided to remain, without feeling even the least bit resentful or averse. Actually, quite the contrary. Anna and her brother Enzo decided to dedicate themselves to 'doing' in their beloved homeland. Here, starting with a small factory making little marzipan fruits, they built a cutting-edge manufacturing plant producing high-quality baked goods that they export all over the world. This calls to mind another important Sicilian writer, Tomasi di Lampedusa, who said: In Sicily it doesn't matter whether what you do is bad or good: the sin we can never forgive is simply that of "doing". The Di Costas truly are one of a kind because they've made 'doing' their reason for living. But this isn't the only thing that makes them one of a kind. In Anna Di Costa's interview you won't find even the slightest trace of a victim complex, no complaints, no requests for assistance from the State. Even when we prodded her with a specific question, she continues to argue that first you have to be committed and work hard. Then, if the Institutions cooperate to make the context more competitive, that's even better. Sure, it's still shocking to read about Sicilian women's unwillingness to leave the home and family and go to work. And this is, in Anna Di Costa's opinion, indeed the biggest challenge: this more general need for cultural growth. You have to start with people; then you can start building inroads. But '*organisations and infrastructure*' aren't much use without cultural change. One last remark: Anna Di Costa never *boasts* about how delicious her products are, which is perfectly in line with her tendency to be discreet. Another thing worth reflecting on. In this December issue featuring a story about commitment, success and optimism, without however overlooking the scrumptious traditional sweets from Sicily and *beyond*, all of us here at Telos would like to wish you Happy Holidays and a peaceful 2019!

Mariella Palazzolo

Anna Di Costa is the Vice President of Di Costa, S.p.A., a major Sicilian confectionery manufacturer that started with a dream and the determination to do business in her homeland. However, it hasn't always been like this.

Anna graduated with a degree in Foreign Languages and Literature, starting her career as a teacher right after.

She taught for many years until, when her father passed away, she decided to give up her *permanent position*, something her friends and relatives thought was practically *blasphemous*, and help her brother Enzo manage and develop their family business.

With considerable economic and financial effort, Anna and Enzo Di Costa set off down the road to industrialisation by installing cutting-edge technology to develop their various manufacturing activities.

In 1995 they inaugurated a new plant in Francavilla di Sicilia, a stretch of land – the Valle dell'Alcantara, not far from Taormina – in one of the most beautiful and picturesque places in the world.

In 2008 the firm became a joint-stock company, and Anna took on the role of managing director. The Di Costa firm, originally



just a small factory making miniature marzipan fruits, now boasts 120 direct employees and provides employment in a broad-range of satellite companies.

Anna Di Costa began travelling for business straightaway: from China to Vietnam, Cambodia, Singapore, Indonesia, Australia, India and the USA, all the way to Latin American, to the UAE, Israel, Egypt and Tunisia. Not to mention Europe.

She sees travelling not just as a work tool, but as a way to learn about life, open the mind, become more flexible and accept lifestyles and habits that are different from one's own. Anna is passionate about cooking, art and reading, particularly publications on psychology. She loves cinema, but not TV, and admits that she sings to herself while driving.

Marco Sonsini

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